

Feeling Like I've Missed You All This Time by notalone91

Series: All I Know Is Pouring Rain (Everything Has Changed) [4]

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Angst, Angst and Hurt/Comfort, Anxiety Attacks, Arachnophobia, Ben Hanscom is a Good Friend, Canon-Typical Behavior, Canon-Typical Violence, Character Death Fix, Coma, Eddie Kaspbrak & Stanley Uris Live, Eddie Kaspbrak Lives, Eddie Kaspbrak Loves Richie Tozier, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, F/M, Fear, Fear of Death, Fix-It, Gen, Hospital, Hurt/Comfort, Internalized Homophobia, M/M, Minor Ben Hanscom/Beverly Marsh, Minor Bill Denbrough/Mike Hanlon, Multi, Nightmares, Other, Panic Attacks, Richie Tozier Loves Eddie Kaspbrak, Soft Richie Tozier, Sonia Kaspbrak's A+ Parenting, Stabbing, Stanley Uris Lives, Stanley Uris is a Good Friend, Suicide Attempt, it's not a fix it if stan is still dead god damn it, remember folks, the great canon fix it we've all written

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Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris

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Summary:

“Not since you left,” came the voice on the other end. “Since...”
Richie looked down at his left palm and clenched his hand once or twice. Eddie had the same scar. “It...” Richie said hesitantly. He didn’t know what It was, not really, but what he did know was that It was bad. It meant death.

Unable to let the line go silent for too long, Mike added, “You gotta

come back, man. It's starting again.”

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He stopped and wondered, only for a moment, why he'd decided not to mention Richie...

“No. Home to Derry,” he heard Mike say.

Eddie closed his eyes and shook his head. “It's happening again isn't it?” He cursed his shitty memory and tried to pay attention to the road as he made the turn onto his street.

(Richie and Eddie left Derry together at 18. Richie and Eddie forgot Derry together at 18. Richie and Eddie remember Derry together at 40. Richie and Eddie return to Derry together at 40.)

1. Streetlights Pointed In An Arrowhead Leading Us Home

Author's Note:

As noted, this is the central part of my Everything Has Changed universe. I would suggest reading the other 3 first, but only if you're comfortable knowing (sort of) how this one ends. But the backstory might be helpful. Just know that this is pretty much me taking my big red editor's pen to Chapter 2 and Giving Some Feedback.

One of the mixtapes Eddie had made of upbeat radio hits for their road trip let The B-52's carry down the stairs that reached the patio of the in-law suite over the garage he and Richie had found for practically nothing. The room was, itself, practically nothing, but it was a start. There was a small kitchen, a bathroom, and a living space that they had every intention of sectioning off with curtains to break the area up. The little old lady who owned the house simply had too much space and wanted neighbors nearer by than down the road, as long as they'd check in on her once in a while. Eddie had no problem with that and Richie was ecstatic.

Truthfully, she could have been a witch who was going to shove them into an oven, and neither of them would have given a shit. They were together and they were free. That was all that mattered to either one of them.

"Is that the last one?" Eddie asked from his position, cross-legged in the middle of the area they'd designated as the bedroom, filling a dresser they'd picked up from a Salvation Army shop with their clothes.

Richie huffed, plopping a box of miscellaneous memories between them. "Yep." He dusted off his hands, then balled them on his hips. He looked around the space and smiled, knocking his foot against the side of Eddie's leg. The 15-year-old Malibu station wagon that Richie wasn't even sure would get them across the country was empty. It

was home.

Standing up, Eddie took Richie's face in his hands and looked at him excitedly. "Holy shit," he breathed.

As his hands found a new resting place on Eddie's hips, Richie couldn't help but nod in agreement. "Holy shit." That seemed to be the only sentiment that made sense. Anything else was too much.

Slowly, words began to come to them. "We have our own place," Eddie said, holding himself against Richie, who was walking him back toward the wall.

"We do," he said. He nodded, eyes wide.

Wrapping his legs around Eddie's waist, he let out a breathy laugh. He could hardly believe it. "We got out," he said, leaning forward and catching Richie in a passionate kiss.

It was more than that. For Richie, the most important part was the man who had himself wrapped around him tightly. "We got out together," he clarified when they parted for air.

Eddie smirked, adding "Like there was ever any other way." There wasn't. They had been together for as long as they could remember. In the weeks since they'd left home, things had grown foggy. There was nothing for them there... wherever there was... except the vaguest feeling like there was something they were supposed to do when they found a place. It was easy enough to shake when Richie had him pinned against the wall. "I love you," he said, bringing his hand up to his boyfriend's hair to tilt his head back, granting himself access to his neck and, *oh, was that gonna bruise* .

"I love you," Richie repeated. He worked their hips together and marveled at how nice it was to be able to fool around openly, with no fear. Why had they ever been afraid?

In truth, neither man was sure why everything felt so desperate, such a long-awaited release. "God, we're never going back there," he gasped, working at Richie's shirt, tossing it aside and making a mental note that they needed to pick up a hamper. A hamper. For

their first home.

Agreeing quickly, Richie voiced a quiet "Nope," and he meant it- to the best of his knowledge at the time, anyway. His plan was for them to be as wholly and unapologetically themselves as humanly possibly

But, best-laid plans...

Starting his pre-show rituals some twenty years later, Richie moved from his dressing room to the catwalk over the stage to greet each member of the crew. It was just something small, but it was important to him. He'd learned early on in his career that shows went easier if the crew was on his side. Just a couple of minutes of polite conversation could be the difference between a great night and a really uncomfortable one. As he made his way to the stage left riggers, his phone buzzed in his pocket. Without looking at the screen, he accepted the call. "Big Bertha's Whoretuary. Six Inches or Six Feet, we'll make sure you're under something good. Go for Tripod," he joked, sliding down the railing and hopping to his feet.

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line before a deep, unsteady voice came through. "Hello? Richie? Richie Tozier?"

"Speaking," he confirmed, then lit the screen to check his time. *207 area code*, he thought. *Who the fuck do I know in Maine?*

"It's Mike," came the answer, momentarily making him second guess whether or not he'd actually said it.

Mike ? He spun through his mental Rolodex and came up woefully empty. "Miiike...?" He asked, flipping through every Mike he could think of. If he didn't already have their number, it would either be a New York or LA number. Not Maine.

"Hanlon," affirmed the voice. A beat, then, "From Derry."

Richie nodded absently, then, when it finally occurred to him that the person on the other end couldn't hear that, he added a noncommittal "Oh." Testing the name in his mouth, he left it unvoiced, repeating it twice more. Then, it clicked. Mike. Mikey. *Tricycles have three wheels and function quite well, Micycle* . Tall and strong and soft and patient.

And in love with... Phil? Will? *Bill!* Bill Denbrough. Who left and went... somewhere... But now, he was an author! And he lived nearby! Richie had done an episode of his wife's TV show! *Wife ...* Poor guy, he thought. There were others; a girl with flaming red hair and a disposition to match whose memory made his fingers twitch for a cigarette he hadn't wanted in years, and boys, a history nerd who's bright smile brought with it a tenderness that none of the rest of their group possessed, one who often seemed to hate them, but loved them more fiercely than most, they just exhausted the shit out of him... and one more... a broken arm, an inhaler, a fanny pack, fast-talking and feisty and- *Eddie* . They really had known each other forever, hadn't they? Why couldn't he remember how long they'd actually been together? How they'd gotten together? As the memories of his friends came flooding back, Richie's mind suddenly froze on one thing- fear. *Fuck, fuck, fuckfuckfuck* . His stomach gave a jolt. These were his friends. His best fucking friends. Why couldn't he remember them? What were their fucking names? What else had he blocked out? And, oh, *God* , did he have to talk to Eddie. "Oh. Hey, man. God, what's it been? 20..." he stammered, realizing how long he'd been silent.

"27 years," Mike supplied.

Running the numbers in his head, Richie knew that couldn't be quite right. "No, no. Not that long," he said. They hadn't left in 1989. They'd have been 13. Sure, they were young, but they'd definitely graduated high school. Definitely.

"Not since you left," came the voice on the other end. "Since..."

Richie looked down at his left palm and clenched his hand once or twice. Eddie had the same scar. "It..." Richie said hesitantly. He didn't know what It was, not really, but what he did know was that It was bad. It meant death.

Unable to let the line go silent for too long, Mike added, "You gotta come back, man. It's starting again."

"I-I- I don't think I can," he stammered, trying to banish the too-new memory of Bill from his mind. "I got... I got a life out here man. I don't have time to be fucking around in-"

“This is more than that. It's bigger than you.” The man on the other end sounded tired. Richie wondered where he fell on the phone tree. Probably pretty far down. He never was much help. He just hoped he was higher on the list than Eddie. He needed to call him; to warn him.

Still, the words he wanted to say gave way to a cheap joke. “Funny. Your mother never seemed to complain,” he sniped, wondering how long it had been since he stooped for a mom-based quip. Ages, he could only guess.

There was a breathy laugh from the other end of the line. “You haven't changed.” Richie groaned, knowing that that sure as hell wasn't true. Anyone who thought that Richie-at-40 and Richie-at-13 were anything alike were... probably telling the truth, for all he knew. What fucking difference did it all make, really? The line fell silent and Richie, selfishly, wondered if whatever it was had claimed Mike and he could get out of having to go back to Derry. Unfortunately for him, the voice piped up once more. “You know what this means, right?” Mike asked.

Richie slid his glasses up and rubbed his eyes. He had developed migraines over the years and could feel the telltale stab over his right brow bone. He was sure that, by the time he went out on stage, the lights would be impossible to handle and he'd be once again wishing for the stage to open up and swallow him whole. “Yeah,” he groaned, knowing exactly what Mike was saying. “Yeah. But, uh, I gotta go man. I'll see you.”

“Richie?” Mike asked, in place of the litany of questions and list of attempts at convincing he'd formed.

He sighed, replacing his glasses and rubbing his eyes. “Yeah, alright Mike. Later,” he said, allowing himself to breathe for what felt like the first time since he picked up the phone. As the backstage loudspeaker called five, his stomach lurched and he flung himself out the door onto the fire escape, losing what little he'd eaten since lunch all over the alley. His hands trembled and he clung to the railing for dear life.

After he managed to get his shit together, no thanks to his fucking

manager, Richie went out on stage to start his act. Okay, so he *thought* he had his shit together... First joke out of the gate, he slipped and called himself Trashmouth and the memories started over again. This time, it was people screaming- kids, his friends, in trouble. A cacophony of shouts and a resounding "beep beep, Richie" from the girl's voice. *Beep Beep, Richie.* He hadn't thought about that in ages. Beep beep had always been their way of telling him he'd gone too far and to back it up. He couldn't even get into the first joke before he took off, hyperventilating and dry heaving into a trash can. They attempted to restart the show twice and, after a half-hour, canned the whole thing, refunding the tickets for the whole audience.

He made his way to the car and sped home, hoping that, maybe Eddie would be back from his last inspection. No dice. He threw himself down onto the couch and stared at his phone, willing Eddie to call him. There was no use in calling him if he wasn't going to be able to talk. He didn't want to worry him and he knew, if Eddie remembered any of that, he'd come home and want to talk it out, probably complete with pro- and con- lists. Without so much as a hello, he picked up and started talking, as though he'd been the one that called. "Well, that was a fucking disaster."

Having expected the call to go to voicemail, Eddie balked for a moment, trying to follow. "What was?" he asked.

"My show," Richie answered, in a tone that was all "duh."

Turning the car onto Cahuenga, he shook his head and flipped off the car next to him that had lain on its horn. "No. No, I'm sure it was fine," he said. He knocked his hand against the window, gesturing to tell the driver he was a jerkoff, then cut him off, speeding into the next block.

Richie closed his eyes and knocked his head against the arm of the couch. "Babe, I threw up, went on stage anyway and bombed." He paused for a moment, pondering if there was something worse than bombed. He settled on adding a mokey, "Atomically." Truthfully, he was pretty sure there was no coming back from this one. His manager had insisted that when he didn't bother to do the cancellation announcement himself because he couldn't even get himself off the floor of the bathroom.

"You threw up?" Eddie asked, missing the point and switching smoothly into worried boyfriend mode. "Are you okay? What did you eat? Do you have a fever?" He peppered him with questions, staring at the face of the radio like that would help him find out what was going on.

Richie really didn't want to go there. "No. It's uh..." He choked back the urge to make a joke, to tell Eddie he was pregnant and they needed to decide what to do, anything. But he just froze.

Panic evident in his voice, Eddie wiggled in his seat, bobbing out into the next lane. "Richie, what's up? Do you need me to come home?" he asked.

He thought it over for a moment. Did he? He didn't know. He choked out a humorless laugh and shook his head, staring at the ceiling. "I think so, yeah," he said.

Eddie banged out the quickest u-ie of his life and headed back for home. Richie sounded awful. Something was wrong. He could feel it. He started to question him again but stopped cold. Incoming call. Maine. "Fuck. I ha..." He blinked at the face of the radio. Maine? "I have an incoming call. I..."

Richie curled in on himself. "Answer it. Call me back." He could hear the panic in his voice and stood, moving to the bathroom. "I love you," he added, sitting on the edge of the tub.

"I love you, too, Trashmouth," Eddie half groaned and then stopped short. Where the fuck had that come from? He cleared his throat and switched lines. "This is Edward Kaspbrak speaking," he said, too businessy for his normal self.

"Eddie. It's Mike." A beat. "Hanlon." Another. "From Derry."

You guys are splashing around in millions of gallons of Derry pee! Doesn't smell like caca to me, señor!

His voice and Richie's fought with each other in his mind and- There was the lightbulb. He'd grown up there! So, why could he remember nothing else? "Of course. Hey, Mike." Fidgeting with his hands Eddie

rocked back into the left turn lane and paused at the light. "How are things?" he asked, trying not to worry and just get home to Richie.

"Not good," Mike said, his voice solemn.

Truthfully, that scared Eddie more than the unknown. Now that he remembered Mike, the thing he could remember most clearly was the boy's radiant smile and the way he truly wore his heart on his sleeve. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said, shortly. "But, listen, Mike, I gotta..."

"Come home."

He nodded and added "Yeah, that's exactly it. My roommate's sick, so..." He stopped and wondered, only for a moment, why he'd decided not to mention Richie...

"No. Home to Derry," he heard Mike say.

Eddie closed his eyes and shook his head. "It's happening again, isn't it?" He cursed his shitty memory and tried to pay attention to the road as he made the turn onto his street.

Mike was quiet for a moment. "Yes. Yeah," he said.

Taking a calculated risk, Eddie blew the red light and- Wham! The cab coming from the cross street was situated firmly in his passenger side back door. "Fuck," he said, jarred from side to side with the impact. Fucking airbags. He certainly hadn't needed the additional punch to the chest to make it feel like he was... having an asthma attack? His hand fiddled with his pocket looking for nothing, since he hadn't carried an inhaler since he was 14 and realized his asthma attacks were actually anxiety attacks. But he hadn't figured that out. Richie had. Richie. Fuck. He needed to talk to Richie. "Fuck," he repeated, slumping forward over the steering wheel briefly. Risk management. Pfft. At least he hadn't decided to be some sort of chauffeur-to-the-stars.

From the speakers, Mike's voice filled the interior of the car. "Eddie? Eds? You okay, man?"

Luckily, he was within walking distance of the house, because as soon as the accident was cleared up and Eddie made his way in,

Richie was in full-blown panic mode. "I'm fine. Richie, I swear," Eddie groaned for the hundredth time as they got ready for bed. He sat back against the headboard and watched his partner pace restlessly. It was cute, really, considering that he knew that he had the reins when it came to panic.

"You crashed your car, babe. We're not fucking going," Richie whined, lacing his hands in his hair and giving it a tug.

It wasn't like he was the only one in their bedroom that had a strong reaction to Mike's phone call. "Okay?" He groaned, flopping onto his side and burying his face in the crook of his arm. "And you threw up and crashed your show." It wasn't a fair comparison, and he knew that, but he wasn't particularly in the mood to argue. As much as every fiber of his being was screaming that it was SO not their problem, there was one tiny voice in the back of his mind that was saying that they had to come home; that it had to end. He really didn't want to say it, and though watching Richie's deeply troubled face and erratic pacing, he decided to just bite the bullet and say what they both had to know: "We have to."

Richie leaned across the bed, hiding his head and doubling over. "Why? We don't actually know what he wants," he whined, then looked up at Eddie. "I don't feel good about this."

Neither did Eddie, truthfully. He empathized with Richie's stance. He did. But he also knew that they had to get it over with. "It's... It's Maine. What the fuck happens in Maine?" he said, reaching down to flick his fingers through Richie's hair comfortably.

"Stephen Howard Oken," Richie started, listing them off on his fingers without so much as a blink, "John Joseph Joubert, James Hicks..."

Eddie groaned, "Alright, Richie." He leaned forward and kissed Richie's forehead. "Jesus, how do you remember that shit?"

"You're the risk analyst! Shouldn't you be the one with all the information?" he asked. He couldn't explain it. He just had a horrible, terrified feeling about the whole thing. "You're gonna drag me back there, aren't you?" He searched his partner's eyes

imploringly, willing him to say no. Instead, he merely nodded. Richie squeezed his eyes shut. "I'm afraid," he said, voice hardly a whisper.

"I know." And he did. He was afraid, too. "When has that ever stopped us before?"

Tossing his glasses onto the nightstand, he gave an exaggerated sigh. "Fine. Don't blame me if you end up stabbed and tossed into a gutter or something."

Eddie released a tense bark of a laugh at the absurdity of it. "I won't. I'll blame Mikey."

As these things often happen, when Richie woke up bright and early the next morning, the notification on his phone's news app was eerily relevant.

Maine Man Forced To Watch As Husband Is Beaten, Killed In Vicious Attack.

Eddie, look at me!

The article went on to name the men in question. They were both targeted for their sexuality, and one was thrown over a bridge into the Kenduskeag. By the time his husband got to him, the man's body had been eviscerated.

You have 10 minutes to decide, pillow-biter: get the fuck out of my house or stay here and die. Your choice.

Nope.

I know your secret. Your dirty little secret.

No. No. No, no, no, no, no, no.

GET OUT OF HERE, FAGGOT .

His eyes struggled to focus on the words. They didn't make sense. The more he read, the less he wanted to know. It was Derry. Of COURSE it was Derry. The guy was reaching for his inhaler. Of

course, he was. He was thrown into the canal. Of course, he was. *Grey water, grey water, grey water* repeated in his head. "Fuck," he hissed, dropping his phone. Eddie stirred next to him and his heart nearly stopped.

Still sleep groggy, Eddie turned into him and asked, "What's the matter?" He was greeted by the bright light of Richie's phone in his face. "Shit," he whimpered, rolling onto his back and away from the offending device, catching no words, just the single number 5 at the beginning of the time. Their flight was at 11. They should be getting up soon, but this was early, even for him.

Unfortunately, it was already processed in Richie's brain and sending waves of panic coursing through his body. Every word every blow came crashing down on him at once, bringing eighteen years of shame and repression down with it. "Fuck." He got out of bed and tossed his phone down next to Eddie, who merely glanced at it, startled. "Fuck!" Richie repeated as he fled from the room, slamming the bathroom door shut behind him. He may have been overreacting but the mere idea of riding into town on the heels of a hate crime? A hate crime to which he and Eddie were all-too subject to? Absolutely not. He flipped the faucets on to cover his stifled cries. He sat on the edge of the bathtub and doubled over massaging his temples.

Still struggling to come up with what, exactly had happened, Eddie sat up, fumbling for the phone to try to see what had upset him so. "Richie, I-" he called out to him. When no response came, he rubbed the sleep from his eyes and strung the words together. Oh. Fuck. "Ohhhkayyy..." he hummed, eyes wide as saucers. That was a valid response. For once, maybe Richie wasn't on eleven for no reason.

And also , he thought, fuck technology, dude. Twelve hours ago we couldn't remember Derry and now the first news alert on their phones is this shit? Fuck that creepy big brother shit.

Moving to the door, Eddie rested his forehead on the wood, leaving his hand on the handle. He wasn't above intruding. That had never been his style. They'd been barging in on each other for thirty years. Nothing he'd be doing behind that door would shock Eddie. Still, at this point, a closed-door in their house was an oddity and if he wanted a minute to get his shit together, he wouldn't deny him that.

Still, *Eddie* didn't want to be alone. He knew Richie saw them in the article. It would have been impossible not to. If they'd stayed in Derry a minute longer, it could absolutely have been them. "Hey, Richie, come out and talk to me," he asked, voice smaller than he'd wanted. "Please?"

On the other side of the door, Richie was fidgeting with the cord of Eddie's hairdryer, coiling and uncoiling it in his hands rapidly. Ever since Mike's phone call, Richie had been wracking his brain to figure out how he and Eddie had met. He knew instantly that they were both involved in whatever this mess was, but he couldn't remember anything before him.

Deciding that enough was enough, Eddie swung the door open and lowered himself in front of Richie, resting his hands on his partner's thighs for balance. He looked up at him, brown eyes threatening to spill tears at any moment. It wasn't often that Richie was completely serious, that still wasn't his nature, but this was different. It truly scared Eddie more, even, than the previous day's phone call. This wasn't going to be good.

"I know why..." Richie said, voice broken and weepy. He stopped, and sniffled, then cleared his throat. "Fuck. I know why I don't remember a life before you." He resigned, in the moment, to a realization he hadn't exactly been ready for. "I didn't have one." He felt his pulse rising in his chest. The life he loved didn't, for the most part, exist in Derry. The Richie Tozier he had become was merely a daydream for that Richie- A distant, unattainable daydream. And nobody there knew that this person was inside of him.

The Losers...

He was hit with a further harrowing realization. Their friends, the people with whom they were supposed to be doing this task, didn't know- couldn't know. And Eddie was never going to agree to that. Still, he had to get it out. He took a deep breath and looked at Eddie sadly. "They didn't know." When not even the slightest light of acknowledgement went off in his eyes, Richie struggled to catch his breath. "Fuck," he cursed. How was he supposed to say this without it sounding like he wanted to... God, he couldn't even *think* about it.

Eddie was growing more and more concerned with every beat of his racing heart. He situated himself between his long legs and brought his hands to his cheeks, forcing him to look back at him. "Richie, calm down," he said, knowing that was a fruitless suggestion if he'd ever heard one. "It'll be..."

Before Eddie could finish his empty platitude, Richie pulled back a little, closing his eyes. He couldn't look at Eddie when he said it. "No. No, it won't be. Fuck," he cursed, again. He was truly earning that childhood nickname back, wasn't he? "They can't know."

"Can't know what?" Eddie asked, ignoring the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"That I'm gay. That we're..." Richie gestured between the two of them uselessly. Together, a thing, a couple, in love, boyfriends, partners, lovers, whatever the fuck they were at that point... It had to get shoved back in the closet along with them, because, clearly, Derry wasn't safe. "A We," he settled on, feeling uncharacteristically dim-witted. Words were normally his thing, but now, he wanted nothing more than purge every word he'd ever known from his brain. Words, and thinking words, were for people who lived on the safe side. Apparently, that wasn't their lives.

Eddie was absolutely not up for that response. "Why not?" he asked. Neither of them had ever been the type to back down from a fight. In fact, Eddie had a weird fleeting memory of Richie at thirteen swinging a baseball bat around at an unseen threat. This was absolutely not happening. They were doing this together, like they did everything else.

Richie put the hairdryer down on the lid of the toilet, opting instead to fidget with his fingers. "I think this..." He trailed off with a sigh, starting over. "I think the reason we reacted the way we did when we got the call..." He forced himself to look at Eddie, "it's not gonna be safe if we..."

"If It knows we're together," Eddie finished. It hadn't even occurred to him. That wasn't going to work. If they were going back, he needed them to be together. "Fuck, Richie. No, no, it'll be fine. We'll be fine," he insisted, despite the nagging voice in the back of his

mind. There had to be something Richie remembered that he didn't.

I know your secret. Your dirty little secret.

"No, we won't be, babe!" He yelled, sliding to the side of the tub furthest away from Eddie and shrinking in on himself. "That town eats people like you and me! That's why we left!" Richie didn't like to yell. He couldn't remember the last time they'd yelled at each other in earnest. Still, he was truly, genuinely terrified of the idea of something happening to Eddie because they were together.

Eddie stood up and stepped back until he found the sink. "So, what, then?" he asked, crossing his arms belligerently over his chest. "We sneak around like a couple of fifteen year olds?" When the love of his life simply shrugged, Eddie felt himself break. After all this time? "Richie, no! Absolutely not," he snapped, hands slicing at the air ineffectively, just as he'd done when he was a kid. "I'm a full-grown, flag-waving, pride-marching, partner-having, Madonna-dancing, ass-fucking gay man and I have been for twenty-however-the-fuck-many years. Going home does not mean going back in the closet. If whatever's going on in Derry is going to have a problem with that, then it can suck my rainbow-striped balls." He punctuated his rant with an indignant sniff and finally let himself breathe. *Asthma my left nut.*

Mesmerized by his partner's rant, Richie simply stared until it was over. Eddie had always been the louder and prouder of the two, and honestly, Richie loved him all the more for it. Still, he couldn't resist... "I think they have pills for that," he suggested, reaching his hands for the other man's waist.

Smiling, and considering his case won, Eddie moved forward to sit on Richie's lap, straddling him. "Probably just placebos because this can't be cured." *They're Gazebos! They're bullshit.* "Gazebos? God, did I used to call the pills my mother gave me gazebos?"

Thinking it over for a moment, he gave a puff of laughter. "Yes. Yes, you did." He rested his forehead against Eddie's and closed his eyes.

The men finished getting ready for their flight. They had a decent sized breakfast, showered, and sat on the couch, watching the tail

end of an old Robin Williams special. Richie even managed to crack a smile during a bit about the design of the human reproductive system, something Eddie was sure wasn't going to happen until this whole Derry business was over. Curled up on the couch, it was easy to pretend that it didn't feel like the end of the world. Everything was normal and they were going to visit with old friends. Everything was fine. Richie certainly hadn't just had a panic attack and suggested that they hide their relationship from people who, he seemed to recall, would probably love them no matter what.

Eddie wrapped himself tightly in Richie's arms and scooted closer to him. He trailed his hands up to his jaw, tilting his face to him. "Look." When he didn't, Eddie maneuvered himself into his lap so that he had no other choice. If Richie wanted to do this this way, Eddie was not letting go without a fight. "Look at me, Richie. Can you give me one reason, one good reason why you think we have to do this this way?"

"Yes," Richie affirmed. Even though he said yes, he didn't seem particularly interested in giving said reason.

After a moment's silence, Eddie made an impatient face and sighed, "I'm waiting." He pressed his body flush against Richie's and waited.

That was not what Richie wanted to hear. Truthfully, he didn't want to hear anything. He thought, just for a moment, how much happier he'd have been if he just... couldn't hear Mike's phone call. *Sorry, man, I'm suddenly deaf and have no other way to get communication from you at all, so whatever you're saying or asking... I hate to say it, but tough shit, my guy. Good luck, though.* But, he reasoned, he'd also never have been able to hear Eddie's voice, so he'd have to deal. He pushed a gust of air out through his nose, then admitted quietly, "Not without sounding like an idiot."

"You always sound like an idiot," Eddie laughed, kissing him quickly.

Appreciating his attempt at levity, Richie snagged Eddie's lip with his teeth and tugged a little. "What does that say about your taste then?" he asked, pushing him back onto the couch and nestling himself between his legs, enjoying this action much more than giving him his reasons. If he thought too hard about those reasons, he

might not leave this apartment, which he was, truthfully, completely okay with, but he knew Eddie wasn't. Voicing his reasons gave them power, and he wasn't about to do that.

Letting him have this one, Eddie gave in to the taller man's actions. He let Richie snake his hands under his robin's egg blue polo and cast it off to the side. He closed their mouths back together once more and smiled against Richie. "My taste is impeccable," he countered, pretending that that wasn't as much a comment on how exceptional he thought Richie was as well as his own discerning choices- which was bullshit, as proven by the way his body reacted to every move Richie made. "How do you expect this to work when you can't keep your hands off me?" he teased, grinding up against him.

Bringing his mouth down to Eddie's neck, Richie voiced, "I seem to recall always finding excuses to touch you before." He slapped Eddie's ass playfully, eliciting a surprised laugh. "Come on, it'll be fun."

He doubted that very much. "Fun," he chorused, lacing his hands in Richie's mess of curls.

Trailing sloppy kisses down his neck, Richie hesitated over the center of his chest, looking up at him. "Come on. You can't tell me you don't remember the teasing and flirting before we got together." He trailed one finger down the defined center of Eddie's abs and hooked it into the waistband of his black jeans.

If he was trying to distract him, then fuck, it was working. "I really, honestly don't remember not being with you," Eddie said, struggling to remember what he had been saying before Richie had laid him back against the couch, let alone a time long since forgotten. He started working his own hands at Richie's grey cords and the detestable button down with the crosses.

"We always had an excuse to touch," Richie said, grabbing Eddie by the cheeks and faking him out of a kiss to give him a wet willie.

They were 12 on the bank of the Sanduskeag. They were 9 on the monkey bars. They were 15 in a hammock in a dirty room... someone's basement? Over and over, Eddie remembered how his

heart would hammer, only to be grossed out, annoyed, flustered, and, despite it all, more than a little relieved. Now, though, he couldn't quite name the emotion he'd drummed up. "How do you remember this?" he panted, bewildered.

Richie pulled back for a moment, as though the action had shocked him too. "I don't. I just..." he stopped and rested back, kneeling across Eddie, fingers ghosting his ribs. Did there have to be a reason? He remembered it. Even if he would go on to forget it in an hour, he remembered it then. "I know it. I've never been able to keep my hands off you." He lowered himself down against Eddie and bucked his hips, fully intending to drive him wild and, maybe, have him forget about the flight and Derry entirely. They'd forgotten it for years, what was a couple more hours?

Lazily draping his arms around Richie's neck, he caught a glimpse of the watch on his wrist. It was already seven. "Fuck," he hissed. "We gotta go. We're gonna be l-" he started, but lost his footing when Richie pressed his thumbs into his hip bones and pulled him further down so that they were flush against each other. "Late," he added ineffectually, rolling them onto their sides and hooking his left leg up over Richie's.

"We're a half-hour from the airport," Richie argued, busying his hands on Eddie's ass. "Our plane leaves in 4 hours. I think we have time," he assured, squinting a little for emphasis.

Eddie laughed, enjoying the way Richie's nose crinkled when he was trying to be a dick. "Oh, you do, huh?" he said, egging him on.

Assuredly, Richie nodded. "I do." His flattened palm trailed its way to Eddie's crotch, finding his length hard and fully erect beneath. "And so, it seems, do you," he added, quirking an eyebrow for emphasis.

"No," Eddie whined, wriggling out from between Richie's arms and attempting to stand. "I'm a grown-up. I can ignore it," he dared, glancing down to where Richie, too, had begun to grow quite hard. He intended to get up and leave his man wanting more, but a strong arm around his middle kept him locked in position.

Devilishly quick and sinfully practiced, Richie leaned up and began to nip and suck at the spot on Eddie's neck that he knew rendered him absolutely defenseless. "Can you?" he asked as his hand made its way into his briefs, tracing the length delicately.

His head lolled back against Richie's shoulder. "Rich..." he sighed, half in pleasure, and half a warning. They really did need to get moving.

"I mean, that is what you have a man for, right? Especially one with a colossally big mouth." Eddie laughed at Richie's still piss-poor attempt at dirty talk as he let himself be laid back on the couch again. Richie tugged down Eddie's jeans and licked a glistening trail towards his cock as he sunk to his knees.

Eddie fanned his fingers through Richie's hair, a gentle smile crossed his lips. "You said it," he teased, the obvious *'not me'* going unsaid. For a moment, sometimes, looking at Richie like this, it was easy to get completely lost in him. Hell, it was easy to get completely lost in him half asleep at the breakfast table dropping pieces of frozen waffle off of his fork. Or walking down the street distracted by a novelty Saint Patrick's Day decoration in a shop window. Or when his rant about a meeting with his manager was funnier than the last 5 years worth of trite bullshit they'd been ghostwriting for him. Or when he didn't even stop to look in a mirror on his way to a gig and still, disheveled and mussed, looked effortlessly handsome and charming and it would take everything in Eddie's power not to stop him and add to the look himself. Yeah, he loved him. And his big mouth.

Chancing a moment's glance up at Eddie, Richie winked. "It is a gift," he muttered, voice low, before deciding that there were much better things he'd like to be doing with his tongue.

"If you think you can distract me out of going with a blow job..." Eddie said in a voice that was coming undone. His hips moved toward Richie of their own accord. One hand slipped out of his hair and fell to the couch, gripping the edge of the cushion tightly.

It would never cease to amuse him how quickly he could work him up in any and all ways. "I would never think that." *And the lie detector test determined that was a lie, Eddie.* "I just wanted to see

those rainbow-striped balls,” he said, trailing a finger along them.

And Eddie lost it. He laughed, loud and open, as he leaned forward and kissed the smug grin right off of his man’s face. “Shut up,” he said, voice still fractured with laughter as he pulled Richie up onto the couch with him, tugging off his t-shirt in the same motion, leaving their chests bare against one another. “You know what I meant.” He kissed him again, this time more deep and seductive. If they were doing this, then they were doing it right.

Richie lifted Eddie’s legs up over his and gave a slight smile. “I do. I always know what you mean.” He teased his open palm down his lover’s chest to his cock. “And what you need.” He folded his fingers around it, licking the tip.

“You.” Eddie said, growing desperate for release. “Just you.”

Between languid licks and slow, direct pumps, Richie said, “Good thing you’ve had me for years, then, huh?” The low tone of his voice sent a shiver down Eddie’s spine. “You know that doesn’t change, right?” Richie guided him up so he was sitting in his lap and moved his mouth to his neck, whispering quietly just below his ear. “I’m yours, babe.”

Unable to restrain himself any longer, Eddie brought his mouth crashing into Richie’s. Their bodies moved together with practiced certainty. After so long, they knew just the right way to drive each other closer to the edge and stop, finally finishing together. Sweaty and panting, they laid together on the couch for quite a while, silent, enjoying the closeness.

Suddenly, it dawned on Eddie. It was the culmination of what Richie had been panicking about since the night before. The man he held in his arms was his whole world. If anything happened to Richie... He got it now. He remembered the panicked shortness of breath, the fear... A decrepit old house and falling through the floor. And he’d just been in a car crash. Richie must have felt all of that come crashing down on him before. Add into it those poor young men from Derry... Fuck. Derry. They were going back there and It was going to have Its way with them.

Fuck.

If this was going to work- If It wasn't going to use them against each other- It couldn't know that they were a weapon in Its arsenal. It couldn't know they were together. It couldn't know and neither could the Losers.

Fuck.

"You're right," Eddie whispered, instantly hoping Richie had, perhaps, dozed off and he'd have the chance to rethink it once more.

Richie turned to face Eddie and laughed incredulously. "Jesus, was I that bad? I know I'm getting old, but..."

Sitting up and pushing away, searching to sort through their discarded clothes, he groaned. "No, asshole. I just..." *Breathe* .

Rubbing the small of his back as he sat up next to him, Richie nodded calmly. "I know." And he did. As soon as Eddie had fallen silent, it was like he'd been inside his head. He could just about hear the gears clicking into place and it broke his heart a little. He was almost to the point where he would have gone with the "We're here, we're queer" approach, but, truthfully, this way felt safer. This was the way they knew it could be done.

As if on cue, Eddie turned to face him, cupping his jaw in his hand and forcing him to look at him. "I want you to understand this, though. I'm not doing this without you. Nothing changes between us. We're just being discreet."

"How do we explain that we remember each other, then?" Richie asked, pulling back and working his way back into his clothes. "I can't remember anything about these people apart from that they matter to me and I don't want to do this again." The words caught in his throat as he shrugged the button down on over his T-Shirt. Do *what* again? "And I said again, but I don't remember what it is we're doing again."

Eddie stood up to tuck his shirt into his pants. "Well, I told Mike my roommate was sick to try to get him off the phone," he suggested.

Eyes wide, Richie balked at the phrase. "Your roommate?" He was giving him grief about this when he'd called him his roommate? Not even friends. Nothing. Roommate. Jesus.

"Shut up," he said, going to the sink in the kitchen island to wash his hands.

Richie followed suit, wrapping the smaller man in his arms as he did. "See, you didn't say anything about it either. You just wanted to use me to your dirty whims, Kaspbrak," he said, pressing up against his back.

"Richie," he started, tired, "I don't ever tell random people on the phone things they don't need to know." When Richie was done rinsing his hands, Eddie turned off the water and turned to face him. "Once I remembered who he was, I was a little otherwise preoccupied to correct him. I'm sure he remembers that we left together if he remembers everything else." He rested his hands on his chest and stared up at him, hoping he was right.

"Then why didn't he ask us about each other?" Richie wondered aloud.

Falling silent for a moment, Eddie thought it over. "Because he didn't know what to ask," he shrugged, moving further into his partner's arms, suddenly feeling very exposed and realizing that they were mere hours away from people not knowing they were together. "We never told him then. I don't think we told anyone at all until we moved out here." He rested his cheek against Richie and closed his eyes, fighting off waves of nerves. "I'm pretty sure I never told anyone I was gay." By pretty sure, he meant absolutely certain. There was no way that he would have said anything to anyone then. It wasn't until months after they'd moved to the Bay area that they realized that they could do all of the little things they'd been doing privately in public and people didn't even bat an eye. Holding hands in the grocery store, sharing off of each others plates, kissing as they parted ways from their morning coffee spot, calling him his boyfriend in casual conversation- it had all come so easily and now, it was going to have to go away.

"I don't think so either," Richie admitted lamely. He knew he hadn't

told anyone. He blamed himself for the fact that Eddie never had either. Eddie had wanted to tell someone- anyone- when they got together, but he'd sworn him to secrecy. Even from Mike. Mike, who they both knew was still hung up on Bill. They'd recognized the secret longing from the minute he'd left. They'd recognized the shame that followed the faintest blush on his cheeks when his name would get brought up. If there was anyone who'd deserved to know, it had been Mike. And he made him swear never to tell him. And here they were again.

Eddie took a deep breath and pulled back, resting against the counter, trying to regain his willpower to get them out the door and get this nightmare over with. "Fuck," he hissed. "I love you."

"I know." *That's like Leia and Han's wedding vows. You guys are practically married now.* He shook the strange voice from his head and leaned in to kiss him. "I love you," he said, letting himself back away then.

2. Right There Where We Stood Was Holy Ground

Summary for the Chapter:

In which the Losers make it back to Derry and find out just what they're facing.

Their plane landed at Newark ahead of schedule and their luxurious rental car was waiting for them at the curb. Everything went the way it never did when you were traveling for leisure. At least it minimized the anxiety they were feeling about the whole thing. They'd decided to make the drive the rest of the way when there were no direct flights to Maine from LAX, because why would there be? Who the fuck goes from LA to Maine willingly if they're not being coerced? As they followed the signs for exit to the highway, Eddie slid his hand into Richie's on the center console. He traced his thumb over Richie's. The feeling was so comfortable and second nature to him now, but he had to, for his own sanity, focus on every second of it. His long fingers. Strong veins that ran up his slender wrists. The beat of his heart in his palm. The weight of it, the heat of it. Everything. After they got out of the car tonight, who was to say when the next time he'd feel it was? He tried desperately to chase out the little voice in the back of his head that kept repeating the word if.

From the driver's seat, Richie merely arched an eyebrow at Eddie, wordlessly asking if he was okay with the fact that he only had one on the wheel. If he was alone in the car, he wouldn't have made a second thought of it, but with Eddie in the passenger seat, there were rules and laws for a reason and they were to be abided ad nauseam or else hear the lecture on the risks of distracted driving. Besides which, Eddie had just been in a fucking wreck the night before. He couldn't have been particularly comfortable with getting back into a car for hours. Still, this was one button Richie would never push. Eddie's fingers laced with his had given him the courage to go on time and time again, and this time would be no different if he'd have him.

Sensing the question, Eddie stated plainly, "I'm not going to let go of your hand until it's absolutely necessary."

“Don’t,” Richie agreed, thumbing over the scar on Eddie’s left hand idly. “Do you remember how...” Richie trailed off for a moment. He’d been thinking about those scars on their hands. “I always thought it was just some coincidence that we had matching scars. But I don’t remember how I got mine. Do you?”

He’d been thinking about it some, too, but couldn’t really place it. “Blood oath?” he suggested sarcastically. *Swear it. Swear if It isn’t dead, if It ever comes back, we’ll come back, too.* They were all in a field and... a piece of broken glass. “Holy shit. No, it was. We all promised we’d come back if it ever happened again.” Eddie said, staring straight forward out the windshield.

Richie shook his head. He could remember the scene now, too. “Not it. *It.*” *Eddie was nearly killed! And look at this motherfucker! He’s leaking hamburger helper.* “Fuck. *It.*” *This is what It wants. It wants to divide us! We were all together when we hurt It.* Richie’s hands clenched instinctively. He’d forgotten, for a moment, that one of them held Eddie’s inside, and he flinched back to reality when he received a squeeze in return.

“Okay, this is good. We’re starting to remember,” Eddie shifted in his seat at Richie’s bewildered guffaw. “It’s good,” he reiterated. “Maybe that gives us an advantage. If we remember faster because we’re together, we’ll get this over with sooner and we can go the fuck home.” He held their joined hands to his mouth and kissed the back of Richie’s. He gently reminded himself that he couldn’t keep doing that and sighed, letting their arms back down to rest.

Richie seemed to tense, instead. “Yeah, but I don’t know what *It* was,” he said. If *It* was that important to their formative years, and even now, then why the fuck couldn’t they remember what exactly they were walking into?

The rest of the drive passed quickly enough and they were nearly there by 5 in the afternoon, giving them plenty of time to be at the restaurant by 8. R.E.M. poured out of the speakers and followed them down the road. It was nice, if not for the sense of doom. And sure, the radio’s insistence that it was the end of the world didn’t help matters, but it didn’t really make a difference. For the time being, he didn’t care. He felt fine.

As they reached the county line, Richie leaned over and made the call he had been dreading; the call that meant that he had to give Eddie up until this whole mess was done. "Alright, Mike. We're heading to the Derry Townhouse to drop our stuff, then we'll be over to the restaurant. What did you say it was called?" he asked.

"Jade of the Orient." The speaker went silent for a moment. Some papers on the other end rustled. "Richie, you said we. You didn't bring your girlfriend or anything, did you? Because I have to say-"

Eddie, who had been playing navigator since they'd gotten off the highway, looked up from his phone and pointed at the next street. "Turn left, Rich."

"On it, girlfriend!" Richie answered, laughing.

From the passenger seat, he simply balked. "What?"

Waving a hand dismissively and turning, he saw the sign up at the end of the street and his stomach dropped. "Nothing." He brought his hand back to Eddie's and laced them together.

"Who is that with you, Richie?" Mike insisted, sounding a little impatient.

Richie laughed, replying with "Your mother." Had Mike always been this easy to rile up? He kissed Eddie's hand and gestured to the phone. He shouldn't have been this big of a pain in the ass, he knew, but it was so good.

His irritation was palpable as Mike spoke again. "God, man. Come on, this is important. If you-"

"Hey, Mikey," Eddie answered, rolling his eyes at Richie.

"Eddie?"

He nodded, as though Mike could actually see him. "In the flesh and at your service," he answered. Unwilling to drop his hand to swat at him, Richie, instead, decided to bite the back of his hand. "Ow. What was that for, asshole?"

Playfully outraged, Richie squawked. "I knew the two of you had a thing," he said with a wink. "At your service and we haven't even seen him yet."

"Oh, cut it out," Eddie snapped.

More shuffling. "Wait, do you guys remember each other?" It was clear that Mike had anticipated no one remembering each other, so he was, rightfully, thrown by their comfort.

Eddie's eyes widened, thinking he'd just blown it and they hadn't even seen anyone yet. "I mean, we were basically college roommates and we never fell out of touch." Richie smiled at his panicked rambling but nodded encouragingly. "I thought you'd have remembered that since you seem to remember everything else."

He threw the car in park as they pulled up out front and laughed, adding "I keep him around so I have access to his mother." An oldie, but a goodie in his mind. He felt Eddie start to relax beside him.

"You haven't changed, have you, Richie?" he asked fondly.

Mind gearing up for another cheap, dirty joke, Richie started back, "You'd be surprised, Mikey. My w—"

But Eddie cut him off at the knees. "Yeah, he's even worse than when we were kids." He gave him a look of warning then rolled his eyes, adding, "It looks like this is us." Silently, he gave Richie a gesture that clearly meant 'get him off the phone.'

"You guys at the Townhouse?" he asked.

"Yeah," Eddie said, opening the door, allowing the ajar chime to signal Mike that they needed to go; to get their stuff in and get ready for whatever he had planned.

"Alright. See you soon," Mike said.

"Later," Richie added, pressing the end call button. He took a deep breath in an attempt to calm the thrumming in his chest. He turned to Eddie, peppering his face with kisses. "I love you," he laced his hands into his hair and held him as tight as he could, maneuvering

over the console. "I'm sorry," he kissed him again, noticing the tense frown he was sporting. "I love you," he repeated, kicking himself for all of the times he thought it but never said it. He should have said it every time it passed his mind. Even when it didn't. Even before he knew that he *love* loved him. When he'd suggested this, he hadn't considered the fact that perhaps this would be the thing to kill him.

Melting into the embrace, Eddie replied, "I love you, too," but then pulled away. They couldn't risk being seen. They had to stop the intimacy right then before they even got out of the car. "God, this sucks," he groaned, covering his face in his hands.

Richie adjusted his glasses and shrugged. "At least with the roommate thing we don't have to worry about two rooms," he suggested.

That didn't help much. He had a sinking suspicion that they wouldn't be seeing their room much for the duration of their stay. Still, if Richie thought they would, he had to let him have that little bit of hope. "Yeah. I guess," he sighed, opening his door and folding the seat forward to wrench out their bags.

Watching him struggle, he leaned over the trunk and shook his head. It terrified him, but he was already second-guessing having to hide their relationship. He wasn't ashamed and he knew, he knew that's how it would look. He was just so afraid of what would happen if whatever they were here for used them against each other. He was fairly certain it had happened before. But they weren't 13 anymore. They weren't kids. "Eddie..." he sighed, ready to do just about anything to make them both feel better about the whole ordeal, "if you want to tell them, we can. I just..."

"No, no..." Eddie said, cutting him off and leaning his head on his folded arms, "talking to Mike and just... being here. I know you're right. It just..." he looked up at Richie with tears stuck in his eyes, "if we have to do this again. Whatever this is..." he gestured limply up at the looming Townhouse, feeling utterly broken down, "I don't want to do it without you." The tears he'd been choking back began to fall.

Richie rushed around the car and swept him into his arms. "Hey. Hey," he cooed, wrapping him as tightly as he could, "I'm not going

anywhere. You're not going to be without me." He pressed his cheek against the top of his head but stopped short of kissing him. "We're still us, babe." Eddie sniffled a laugh and dug his fists into Richie's shirt. He felt so stupid. They weren't breaking up. It wasn't like either of them really broadcast their lives to strangers. But this felt different. "I'm not letting anything happen to you, do you understand me?"

Eddie felt himself calm in Richie's arms, remembering a thousand times where he'd done the same. "Loser," he said, voice muffled against his chest.

"Lover," he corrected as Eddie began to pull back. His fingers lingered a moment on Eddie's right arm, where ages and ages before, a cast had lain, a red V scratched in to edit malicious graffiti. "See, even when we were younger, I was trying to protect you." Flashes of throwing himself between Eddie and danger ran through his head and he knew he was right. He knew they'd made the right decision.

After the big blow out following their first fight with It, Richie wandered a while, dreading going home with a black eye. Instead, he putzed around the arcade until he figured Mrs. K. Would have gone to bed. Seeing the light on, he scaled the wall and knocked lightly on the window.

Eddie crossed to the window and scowled at his best friend before awkwardly sliding the window open partway, letting him do it the rest of the way. He opened it just enough to crawl inside and greeted quietly. "Hey, Spaghetti man." When he got inside, finding Eddie laying on his bed staring at the ceiling, casted right arm elevated on a pillow. He needed a cast. Of course. He was lucky he didn't need surgery. He sat on the edge of the bed and reached out to touch his shoulder gently. "Shit. Are you alright?"

He yanked himself away and edged closer to the wall. "Yeah," he snapped, chewing on the inside of his lip. "My mom has me on house arrest." He turned on his side and rolled his eyes, fighting back tears. "I can't see you."

Pushing himself up off the bed dramatically, he gave a little groan. "Okay. I'll just have a little talk with her. Put her in a better mood."

He tucked his tongue into his cheek and popped his imaginary collar. "I think I've kept her waiting too long."

Eddie wasn't really in the mood for jokes about his mom. Truthfully he was more mad at her than he was at anyone else. She was being unreasonable. And his arm really fucking hurt, even though he was already on his second dose. The only person he wasn't really mad at was Richie and he didn't need him pushing any of his buttons. He groaned his name in warning but reached to tug him back onto the bed.

"Can I at least sign it?" Richie asked, reaching for the cup of markers on Eddie's desk.

Eddie's eyes widened and he sat up to grab the back of his shirt. "And have her know you were here? Fuck no, dipshit," he yelled.

"But..." Richie argued weakly. Everyone had their cast signed. It was just what you were supposed to do. But he hadn't thought about that. Of course, Eddie's mom would flip. Of course, she would. But still, he couldn't help but think that, maybe, if he could figure out a way, maybe, just maybe, when Eddie was locked away by the evil witch, he could see something from Richie and not feel so alone.

He chanced a glance his way but couldn't settle on him, trying not to snap. If he snapped, Richie might leave and that's not what he wanted right then either. He didn't know what he wanted, but that was just about as far from it as he could imagine. "Just fucking stop," he asked.

The bed didn't seem like such a bad idea as Richie found his way back to it, legs aching from use. "Sorry," he said quietly, trying not to jostle Eddie too much. He stared at the mound of plaster of paris between them and felt horribly guilty. Eddie wasn't supposed to have been alone. He was supposed to be with him and Bill. Granted, if he had been, he might have seen the version of himself that Richie saw and, honestly, he wasn't entirely sure that was the better option. The whole thing sucked massive balls. Still, he found himself seething and so tremendously worried. There was a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach that this wasn't over. He just wanted no part of it. "Fuck, Eds, I'm sorry."

With a shrug, Eddie simply added: "It is what it is, right?" It was done. There was no changing what had happened that morning. It would be like trying to uncry tears. It wasn't possible and there was nothing to do but move on.

Richie found that answer difficult to swallow. "I guess. Still-" he said sadly, brushing his fingers against Eddie's. He desperately wanted to hold his hand, but he just... couldn't. He couldn't let himself risk it.

"The doctor said that whoever reset it before they got to me did a good job," he smiled sadly, staring at their lightly touching fingers, and trying to gently shift the topic. "If it had gotten any more swollen, it might not have gone back so easily," he said.

He gave a half-smile and adjusted his glasses, feeling the slightest blush creep across his cheeks. "And you didn't want me to touch you," he said, twisting to face the smaller boy.

"Thank you," Eddie said, edging his hand a little closer to Richie's, his entire body begging for him to take it in his own.

Leaning back against the footboard, he chose, instead, to rest his hand on Eddie's leg, knowing that that was safe. That was normal. Just like the hammock. Just like a sleepover. It wasn't holding hands. In a bed. With the boy he loved. It was just being himself with his best friend. In a bed. With the boy he loved. *Fuck*. He was so screwed. So, so screwed. "Dude, like I'd have ever let you stay like that when I knew I could help."

After a moment of comfortable silence, Eddie edged himself closer to Richie, knocking his knee against his. "I don't ever want to do that shit again," he said, knowing fully that they hadn't defeated It and that it was more likely than not that they would end up dealing with It again sooner rather than later.

His heart thrummed in his chest at the mere thought of having to go through that ordeal again. He wasn't strong enough. His hand gripped Eddie's leg a little more tightly as he tried to demonstrate his strength. "We're not going to," Richie assured. "We're done with whatever shit Bill has planned. Just because he's got his panties in a bunch over Georgie..."

"That's not fair. We all loved Georgie and we all love Bill. We've been doing this to try to help our friend, right? It's important," he said. And it was. If the adults of Derry wouldn't do anything to help, they had to do something. It wouldn't be right. Not when they'd gotten so close.

Richie tried to keep his voice down but found his voice coming out in high pitched bursts. "Yeah, but, Eddie, look at your arm. That's important," he said, gesturing between them before bolting out of the bed to pace. "Not whatever guilt Bill has over something that's not his fucking fault."

"Have you told him that?" Eddie asked, plucking at the fuzz on the edge of his cast, determined not to look at his friend.

Richie rolled his eyes, then winced. "Told him what?" he asked, leaning back against Eddie's desk and crossing his arms over his chest. There was no telling Bill anything anymore. He wouldn't hear it.

"That you don't think it's his fault, you dipshit," he said, nudging the bedpost with his foot.

He scoffed, staring at Eddie, astounded that he'd even suggest it. "No! He should know that we don't think that, shouldn't he?" When his question was answered by the slightest shrug of his shoulders, he plowed on. "I mean, we're all traipsing along through nasty ass sewers for him. We wouldn't be doing that if we thought it was his fault. I mean, fuck," he said. Eddie winced, hoping his exclamation wasn't too loud. "We've seen It. We've seen the reason. We've been chased by the fucking reason all summer. And I don't want one of us to be next." He ran his fingers over the fabric of the curtain delicately and moved back, staring at the sun-bleached edge.

"We won't be," he said assuredly. There was no doubt in his mind.

"You won't be. I'll make sure of that," Richie said, voice level. He moved back to the window and went to head back out.

Eddie balked, not understanding what he was reacting to. "What in the fuck is that supposed to mean?" He clambered out of the bed and

called after him in a hushed tone. "Richie." By the time he got to the window, all he could grab was the back of his shirt to stop him. "Hey, Richie! Stop. Get back here." He managed to yank him back in through the window and send him off balance to the floor with a thud, making a mental note that, if this was going to keep happening while he was on house arrest, he was going to have to start putting pillows there to break his fall. "Get back in here," he repeated, closing the window and helping his friend up. "What do you think you're gonna do? Kill Bill? Go finish It off yourself? Come on, Richie. Calm down."

Fruitlessly, Richie tried to tug himself away, not trusting that he wouldn't impulsively wrap Eddie in a hug and break down sobbing. When the smaller boy put up more of a fight than expected, Richie pouted and stared at the floor. He didn't know what he expected, really. He was just so scared, and truthfully, really fucking pissed. But when he allowed himself to look up again, he saw Eddie, gazing at him patiently.

Facing each other squarely on for the first time since Neibolt, Eddie finally took notice of the vicious shiner developing under Richie's glasses. "What happened to your eye?" he asked, reaching his good hand out to swipe his thumb beneath it, thinking back to what bad shape he'd been in when he'd crawled in his window two weeks prior, leading to a whole week straight of late-night, unannounced visits, the first of which delivering with it the realization that Eddie loved Richie. Like *love* loved and hoo boy was *that* taking some time for him to adjust to. It broke his heart, but he had to ask, "Not your dad, right?"

Richie gave a humorless chuckle. "No. No, nothing visible, remember?" He swallowed thickly, pretending not to notice the subtle relief on Eddie's face. "No, after you left, I..." he trailed off, trying not to make it sound as one-sided as it truly felt. Bill was being unreasonable? I stuck up for you and Ben and was being a bitch? I couldn't get Bill to see reason. "Bill and I might have fought," he said weakly embarrassed. What they really didn't need was infighting.

"Fought?"

Releasing a sigh, Richie nudged his glasses up on his nose. "He was

talking about next time. And all I could..." he shook his head and started absently rubbing at the tips of his fingers. "You could have died in that fucking crackhouse and he's already planning for next time and he doesn't even believe that Georgie's dead." He paused, hating himself for saying it, but it was true. Georgie was dead. Betty Ripsom probably was, too. It was horrible but denying it didn't make it any easier on anyone. "At least, he won't admit it. He doesn't care about any of us. All he cares about is proving that Georgie's alive and by the time he realizes that's not going to happen, it'll be too late for the rest of us."

Eddie backed up until his knees found the bed and sat back on it. He stared down at his feet and shook his head. "You guys shouldn't have fought." He worried at his lip, then looked up at his friend. He didn't like the idea of people fighting, especially his friends, and especially over him. Even if his heart felt like it was doing somersaults at the idea of Richie caring enough to fight anyone, most of all Bill, over him.

"Did you not hear me?" Richie said, sitting dangerously close to him. "You could have died." He powered through the vision of Eddie's head sticking up out of the mattress spewing blood. Eddie wasn't the only one who had been hurt. "Ben could have died. I mean, what the fuck? We've only known that kid for like a weekend and Bill is gonna end up getting his face on a fucking milk carton."

Trying desperately to be the voice of reason, Eddie replied, "You don't know that." He rested his hand on Richie's leg and twisted himself toward him. "So, what happened after the fight?"

Adjusting his glasses again, he cleared his throat nervously. This was the part he was most nervous about telling Eddie. "Stan, Ben, and I left. Beverly stayed with Bill, and Mike..." he trailed off, he couldn't quite put his finger on it, but there was some sort of sadness in his eyes when he'd looked at Bill like he couldn't see how Bill was missing the way the rest of them felt. Like it broke his heart. "I don't know. He lagged behind and I didn't stick around to find out. I don't know. I don't care," he lied, going back to rubbing at his fingertips nervously.

Eddie thought it over for a moment. The room filled with silence as

the two boys worked through everything they'd gone through since leaving the house on Neibolt. Eventually, breath a little jagged, feeling the panic rising in his chest again. "So, what you're saying is The Loser's Club is now split in half?"

Unable to look his best friend in the eye, he focused on his hands. "Yeah. I think that's what I'm saying." What happens when a club splits in half?

"Well, it can't be half because there's seven of us. The majority rules," Eddie said. It was plain as day to him.

Richie's eyes widened instinctively. "Oh. I mean..." he stammered, inching away from him ever so slightly. He hadn't imagined that he was advocating for the wrong thing. Maybe he didn't know Eddie as well as he thought. He rolled his middle finger between his index and thumb quickly. "I guess if you want to go back, then-"

"When did I say that, fucknut?" Eddie whisper-yelped. "Have you seen my arm?" He gestured to the oversized white cast emphatically. "Besides Bill goes all nutso and decides to punch you?" He pulled a face that would have made a less stressed Richie laugh hysterically before egging him on. Instead, he gave a bone-weary smile. Eddie hated seeing him this worked up. "I'm on your side, Richie," he assured, resting his good hand atop Richie's and giving it a squeeze. He adjusted to make sure that Richie was looking him square in the eye. "I'm always on your side."

"Oh," Richie said quietly, heart nearly hammering out of his chest. He didn't have a side in the matter. His side was Eddie.

Eddie smiled, letting out a vaguely sarcastic, "Yeah, oh." He nudged his shoulder against Richie and teased, "Idiot."

"Asshole," Richie countered, with a snort of a laugh. He wrapped his arm around Eddie's head and tousled his freshly brushed hair.

Shrugging him off, Eddie swatted his hands away. "Jerk."

Richie moved to tickle Eddie's ribs, adding a playful, "Bitch." He knocked the boy back into the bed and dodged each limb as skillfully

as he avoided Sagat's strikes every afternoon.

"Motherfucker," Eddie hissed, linking his knee around Richie's and bringing him down beside him.

He laughed, propping himself on his elbow. "That's kind of a given. I mean, you can probably hear the bedsprings all night long," he said, bouncing demonstratively.

Eddie simply shook his head, eyebrows raised slightly. "I walked into that one, didn't I?"

"Yeah," Richie nodded, sitting up fully and moving toward the edge of the mattress, dreading the idea of having to say goodnight; furthermore, dreading the idea of sleeping in his own lonely bed that night. He'd never, never tell him this, but he always slept better by Eddie's side.

As usual, though, he didn't even have to ask. "Are you staying, or what?" Eddie whispered, moving closer to the wall to leave room for Richie.

Never needing to be asked that question twice, Richie quickly kicked off his shoes and moved to the backpack in Eddie's closet he'd left a couple of weeks earlier with a couple of changes of clothes so he didn't have to worry about rifling through Eddie's stuff. Before long, he was back in Eddie's bed, adjusting the pillow between them for Eddie's arm. They were facing each other. Eddie was silent, but still awake. Richie lay there for a moment, just watching him, grateful to whatever higher power was out there- probably a fucking turtle or some shit for all he knew- that they'd both gotten out of that hellhole alive.

"Stop staring at me, creep," Eddie whispered, snatching Richie's glasses off his face and putting them on his nightstand. That did little to stop him from staring, but at least Eddie felt a little more confident that he might not be able to make out the doe-eyed expression he knew was all over his face.

Richie let his hand fall next to Eddie's and wished beyond all

measure that Eddie would take his hand again. To his surprise, when he woke up the next morning with both of his hands in Eddie's and their legs overlapping, he found Eddie had already been awake and had made no moves to untangle them. He could never have dreamed that he'd spend the next 27 years sleeping much the same way.

"Hi. I have a reservation under Tozier," Richie said to the man behind the desk as he and Eddie stood side by side in the lobby-cum-lounge of the Derry Townhouse.

The weathered old man seemed to be just about on his tiptoes to have his eyes reach the desk that even Eddie could prop his elbows on. "Tozier... Tozier," he repeated, voice high and shaky as he read over the page. "No Tozier here."

He glanced over at Eddie and shrugged. "That's weird. Did I make the reservation or did you?" Eddie mirrored his shrug then slid under Richie's arm instinctively, but never once looked away from the clerk—*was he drooling? Poor guy must have had a pretty massive stroke. Even his left eye seemed to be drooping.* "Can you try Kaspbrak?" Richie asked, seemingly unphased by the man, gesturing for Eddie to pull out his wallet in case he asked for ID.

After a tense moment, and some very strange noises, the clerk tapped a long, tobacco yellowed fingernail on a line in the book. "There we go. Kaspbrak. Room 302. Have a nice stay," he singsonged, retrieving the key and passing it along to them. Then, he winked, whistling as he walked away.

I know your secret...

Richie blanched and quickly grabbed his suitcase and duffel, making a beeline for the third floor, Eddie at his heels with his suitcase and toiletry bag. "Shit. Shit, shit, shit," he repeated with each step, once more as he fidgeted with the key, nearly dropping it as his hands shook harder with each passing second, and one final time as he opened the door and dropped onto the bed, face down. Eventually, he rolled onto his back to find Eddie standing beside him, knees knocking against the mattress, his arms folded around his middle. "Okay, we can do this, right? Like, they're not gonna take one look at us and know, right?" he asked.

In his mind, it didn't seem likely. There was one person, Eddie was sure, would be able to see right through any lie they tried to feed. "Richie..." he started, sounding a little like he was going to try to comfort him, but couldn't find the words before he was interrupted.

"No, I'm serious. In what world is this gonna be okay?" He asked, fidgeting his fingers at the elbows of his jacket.

In a moment of clarity, Eddie reached down and rested his hand on Richie's thigh, glad that it seemed to still him, even just a little. "In the one that we've lived in for almost 30 fucking years, Richie. Relax," he coached, sitting down next to him. "We won't tell them. We've already agreed to that. But..." he added, trailing off. Richie turned to him with a look that seemed to plead with him not to say it. "We were also best friends all along. Mike knows we live together. Fuck, Mike saw us off, didn't he?" *Someone's gotta man the battlements. No, they really don't, Mike. Man, you gotta get the fuck out of here.* He could see them standing around the beat-up old station wagon they'd crossed the country in like it was yesterday. For the first time, Mike's appearance was swimming into view. His dark eyes, his broad, charming smile. He was just slightly shorter than Richie, then, but his strong frame made him seem like he hulked over him. He'd helped them gather up supplies for their place that they hadn't been able to sneak out of the Kaspbrak house. Eddie smiled, remembering that stage in their life. "Like helped us put our shit in the car saw us off." He trailed his hand up Richie's chest, sitting beside him. "So, we drop the PDA and we're good," he said, leaning in to kiss him gently with a smile that screamed 'simple as that.'

Richie squeezed his eyes together tightly then began kneading at his fingertips. Seeing his nervous tic pop up, Eddie laced their hands together and, instead, rubbed his thumb across Richie's. "Okay. I'm sorry," he said, staring at the bed between them. But, since they were definitely not in public, so Richie leaned up and kissed Eddie, rolling him onto his side, alternating "Okay" and "I'm sorry" over and over.

"What are you sorry for?" Eddie asked, propping himself on his elbow so he was above Richie.

It was embarrassing. He was being an idiot and he knew it. He just couldn't put his finger on what, specifically, was behind it. "I don't

know,” he admitted.

A sharp stream of breath escaped Eddie’s nose. “You need to stop apologizing. You haven’t done anything wrong, asshole.” He freed one hand and shoved lightly at his shoulder, trying, albeit weakly, to break him out of his funk.

“What?” Richie groaned.

Eddie sighed, tired. “You’ve already switched into this weird beaten down version of yourself,” he began, voice strained. These were extenuating circumstances. Still, he couldn’t hide his own nerves. “And nothing’s even happened yet. I know you’re scared. I’m scared too, but for fuck’s sake, we don’t really know what Mike even wants!”

Unable to put words to his fear, Richie stammered his way around his true feelings. “But, I just...” he busied his hands on the hem of Eddie’s shirt and tried to bring the fuzzy, too-long forgotten memory to the front of his mind. “Last time...” *Wanna play loogie? Eddie, look at me! Don’t fucking touch me!* He looked down, ashamed of himself. “I couldn’t protect you. This time feels worse. This time-”

"Is *different*! We’re not fucking kids, Richie. Jesus! If you don’t stop making this into doomsday, you’re sleeping on the floor until we get home! And with your shitty posture, your height, planes, tiny midlife crisis cars,” he listed, and Richie yelped. The so-called midlife crisis cars were part of their travel tradition. Their cars were always new and top of the line, best safety ratings, but whenever they had to rent a car, they’d try something new and different they’d never, ever buy for themselves and they always enjoyed it. Eddie was the car guy and the Tesla had been his choice, not Richie’s. But Eddie plowed through with his list, hands frantically moving to emphasize each word, “trying to cram your lanky ass into whatever tight spaces we end up wandering through, and our lack of proximity to your chiropractor, you old coot, you’re going to be miserable by the time we get home and, despite your constant remarks to the contrary, I’m not little enough to walk on-” Richie’s amazed little laugh snapped him out of his rant, landing on a sharp, “What are you looking at?”

Before his eyes, Richie had seen Eddie slide back through every year they’d known each other; through the last ten years of comfortable

bickering, the stressed-out college through young adult what-am-I-doing-with-my-life-I-feel-like-I'm-floating-with-no-direction tirades, the teenage outbursts of a boy who'd seen too much, and the flustered reactions of a kid who didn't realize that his pain in the ass best friend was teasing him out of a deeply rooted love that would last through all of that. He laughed again, tugging his man into his lap. "The guy I fell in love with," he answered.

"Bring the one I fell in love with back," he instructed, resting his forehead against Richie's.

He took a deep breath. The guy Eddie fell in love with was hidden behind a thick wall of dirty jokes and denial. That should be easy enough. "If we can get your mom to let go of him for a minute," he joked. "You're good with sloppy seconds, right?" He leaned up, open-mouthed, for an exaggerated raunchy kiss.

Eddie covered his mouth with his hand, wincing as Richie licked his palm. He didn't know what else he'd expected when he'd more or less specifically asked for the 13-year-old version of Richie. "There he is," he groaned, pushing him flat back onto the bed and sliding off of him.

"I like it when you're mean," Richie said with a growl. "Do it again, Eds," he added in an over-the-top, porny voice.

He got up off the bed, swatting away the hands that begged him back. "Later, fuckface," he said, focusing on the suitcases. "And don't call me Eds," he chastised. As he started putting his clothes away, he realized that was the first time in years that he'd fought the nickname. He cast a quick look over his shoulder to find that Richie had adjusted onto the bed and started to doze off. All he could hope was that he hadn't noticed.

The first hour back in Derry was strange for Eddie. He unpacked their things quickly, Clorox wiped the whole bathroom and all of the door handles... and remotes... and light switches... and the alarm clock, the phone, the face of the dresser, the coffee pot, the window... eventually, he had to stop himself before he started trying to decontaminate Richie, laughing as he realized that would be a job. But also, waking him up with, basically, a sponge bath would

probably make them very, very late for dinner. Instead, he chose to pounce on him like some sort of wild animal, startling him out of his nap. Richie splashed some cold water on his face and they made their way down to the car, amazed that no one else was there yet.

They made it to the restaurant quickly, but Richie didn't bother to turn off the engine. "Go ahead in," he prompted, fingers drumming against the wheel nervously. "I need to swing into a gas station."

Eddie recognized the twitch, even though Richie had kicked the habit ages ago. "You're not gonna..."

"I need a fucking cigarette, babe," he said, leg beginning to shake as well. He wasn't about to hide it. They had just been dropped into a literal nightmare and if he wanted to chain-smoke his way through it, so be it.

Open-mouthed, Eddie looked over bewildered. "Richie, you quit, God..." They were young. It was pre-LA, he remembered, because they'd joked about how going out was easier for them than for so many of their friends as every restaurant and bar turned no smoking, so it must have been "18 years ago." It hadn't been easy. He'd been up to over a pack a day at that point and Eddie had begged him to stop. Eventually, he'd decided that he was going to give up Richie's mouth cold turkey until he gave up cigarettes. By the end of the second week, Richie had gone and bought the patches, the gum, and a set of tapes.

They were back in Derry two hours and all of that work was going to be out the window in thick white curls of smoke. "I know," he said, a little ashamed at the weakness. "And I need a cigarette."

"Okay," Eddie said sadly, shaking his head. It was ONLY going to be okay while they were in Derry, though, of that much he was sure. He added another quiet, resigned, "Okay," as he opened the door and let himself out.

Richie reached his hand across the console and grabbed Eddie's hand, pulling him back to kiss him. "I l-" The familiar words died on his lips as he saw the sad smile Eddie wore. PDA. "Fuck," he spat, hands going back to the steering wheel with white knuckle pressure as he

tensed his jaw pointedly.

Sliding back into the seat, Eddie brought his hand to rest on Richie's cheek. "We need to come up with something else then, because, this?" He drew an exaggerated circle around his grim expression with an outstretched index finger. "Not a good look."

Richie moved his face out of Eddie's grasp. "Fuck you, dude," he whined, not allowing himself to look at him.

"YES. There we go!" Eddie said enthusiastically. "Every time you want to say I love you to me, say Fuck you instead. I'll know." He smiled, knowing how often they'd said it to each other as kids. A 'fuck you' for jumping in the hammock with him when he'd wanted to be closer to him. A 'fuck you' for a joke that he didn't want to think was perfectly timed and hysterical because he was the butt of it. A 'fuck you' for pushing him under in the quarry and pushing him out. A 'fuck you' for making his heart skip a beat. He nodded, thinking back on it. They'd managed well on that system for years and no one had suspected. "No one else will know, but I will," he assured.

Richie coughed out a laugh, that brought with it a few tears he hadn't realized were so close to the surface. "That's so fucking stupid," he said hanging his head. He remembered the way the curly-haired boy would roll his eyes at their fights. The way Mike and Bill would exchange knowing glances. The girl's not-so-subtle hints that she'd be okay with it if he ever wanted to talk about it. The chunky boy's sympathetic gaze as he'd stare at Eddie when he walked away. They were about as transparent as cling film and Richie knew it. But, at least with this method, no one would think anything was different.

"So are you," Eddie cooed, wiping away the slowing tears gently. "Fuck you, Richie," he said as tenderly as he could.

Richie sighed. "Fuck you, too." He smiled softly, thinking 'I love you' as loudly as he could.

It would work. It wasn't perfect, but it would do. He was proud of himself. "See? Easy," Eddie said. "I'll see you when you get back." He finally let himself out of the car and headed inside.

Hesitating for the briefest moment, to watch Eddie get safely inside, Richie chased off the strangely intrusive doomsday thoughts that were infiltrating his brain. *Fuck, he needed a smoke.* He peeled out of the parking lot in search of the nearest convenience store.

In a lot of ways, Derry remained frozen in a sort of timeless stasis. However, the outskirts of town had, at some point, welcomed a 7-11 and, for the first time maybe ever, Richie was excited to see one. He entered the brightly lit store and greeted the tired young girl at the register and bought two packs of Marlboros and, wow, *they* were more expensive than he remembered. Granted, he remembered that, when he started, he mostly bummed them from... shit. He could not remember her name. He pulled his hands through his hair. Opening the pack, he popped one out into his hand and rolled it in his fingers, cursing this rotten fucking town. Fuck. He hadn't bought a lighter. He debated going back inside for one, then thought against it. He really needed to get to the restaurant.

The whole way back, he gave himself so much shit for his lapse that he hadn't even had yet, but he knew- he *knew*, it would only get worse. He'd been weak as a kid, now he was weak as an adult, he thought. As he pulled into the parking lot of Jade Of The Orient, he rested his head on the steering wheel for a second before banging it a couple of times. Five, if anyone was counting. Richie wasn't. The only thing Richie was counting was the seconds until he and Eddie were back on a plane to LA. Except for the part where they hadn't even bought return tickets because they just didn't know what they were up against. As he got out of the car, he locked eyes on a couple embracing by the doors and felt all of his energy drain out of him as he remembered that he couldn't touch Eddie like that when he saw him. As he neared them, he was instantly struck by the thought that she looked so familiar. Red hair, sharp fashion... holy shit. It was Bev! *Bev!* That was her fucking name! Had she brought her husband? And he was good looking. Good for her. No, the guy was familiar, too. Was it... Bill? No. No, he was shorter. Who was this guy?

Didn't matter. He was just about on top of them when his mouth got away from him. "You two look amazing. What the fuck happened to me?"

A beat. Recognition. Bev threw herself into Richie's arms and greeted. "Hi. Richie, oh my God."

"Hey, man," Richie said, greeting... his mind spun absently before landing on Ben. Holy *shit*, Ben!

He didn't get the chance to use his freshly remembered information before the blanks were being filled in for him. "Ben," he said with a laugh that seemed to say "of course you didn't recognize me."

"No shit," he countered, grateful that Ben's arms were as strong as they were because he might have fallen on the ground otherwise. He had certainly made the right comment when he approached because holy shit, he got hot. "I know." He smiled, despite himself. How had he ever forgotten them?

The trio entered the restaurant and were directed to a private room wherein stood Bill, Mike, and Eddie. Sensing the third wheel vibes Eddie was sending, even not facing the door, Richie scanned the room for a distraction.

A gong. A literal honest-to-fucking-God gong was situated on a table nearest him, complete with a mallet. He picked the small stick up and gave it a good whack. "This meeting of the Losers Club has officially begun!" he called.

"Look at these guys," Eddie said, locking eyes with Richie when he turned. His eyes flitted to Ben quickly then back to Richie for help.

Catching the not so subtle call for help, he mouthed "Ben," and made an accompanying gesture to signify his previous weight. Eddie's eyes widened slightly as he fought to keep his mouth shut.

They filed into the round table, Eddie darting quickly into the seat beside Ben. If he didn't know better, Richie would have expected Eddie to stick his tongue out at him, then make a move on Ben. But he knew better... maybe. Bev happily tugged Richie into the seat beside her, leaving the empty space between the two men. The group laughed and talked through the meal, for what seemed like easy hours. They caught up on each other's lives. They laughed and joked as though it had been days since their last meeting, not years. It was

easy and fluid and Richie felt something click back into place. He didn't even panic when Eddie swore up and down that he was stronger than him and challenged him to an arm-wrestling match like he'd done so many times when they were young. He bested him easily, even after he shouted out, drunkenly, "Let's take off our shirts and kiss!" Richie entertained it for half a moment, considering how close he'd come to kissing Bev, only to be faked out and jabbed in the tongue with her chopsticks sending beef and broccoli scattering into his lap. Then, he remembered, no. Eddie wasn't his Eddie. Not as far as anyone in Derry could know.

"So, let's talk about the elephant not in the room," Richie said eventually, skillfully deflecting a question about his love life. "Ben, what the fuck man?"

"Okay, so I lost a couple of pounds," he said, focusing on his thumbnail as it peeled at the label on his beer bottle.

Richie balked. "A couple? Dude, you're hot," he said, knocking back a swallow of his whiskey. "You're like, every Brazilian soccer player rolled into one." The whole table laughed and Richie certainly didn't miss the way Eddie's gaze scanned over him slowly. "Gorgeous," he added as everyone else put their two cents in.

Eddie nodded approvingly. "That's true."

"Stop, you're embarrassing him," Bev laughed, not so subtly dragging her sweater down over her arm. Eddie would have sworn he saw... but he shook his head. There was no way.

"Alright, so is Stanley coming or what?" Ben asked, trying to redirect the conversation back to the business at hand. Instead, he succeeded in deflating everyone like a ruptured red balloon. A half a dozen heads dropped in solemn recollection, each finding him in their own memory.

"Stanley," Bev whispered.

Eddie breathed a tense "Fuck..."

"Stan the Man," Bill added with a smile.

Richie struggled for a while, trying to pull up his last name. “Stan...” he started, rolling through the names they used to call him. “Stan Urine,” he said and Bill’s lip twitched up into a small smile, shaking his head before Richie pointed at him. “Stan Uris!”

Mike, however, was quiet. He just watched as the memories began to rain down on his friends.

“No, of course not. Stan’s...” Smarter than us, Richie’s brain supplied. Probably an old fart by now. A pussy. Weak. Eventually, he settled on “Stan’s not gonna show.”

The recognition of Stan worked a lot better for refocusing their meeting. They talked about how they’d reacted to Mike’s call. Richie commented about getting sick. Eddie admitted to crashing his car. Ben and Bev’s reactions were more subtle, but they’d always been more subtle. Bill stammered a little before Mike filled in the one overwhelming emotion everyone shared: fear. When he was finally prodded into explaining why he’d brought them all back to Derry, Mike was not particularly forthcoming with details. The memories of It, of Pennywise, came back to them. For a bunch of fully grown, successful adults, their cacophony of dissent was enough to rival a room full of middle schoolers finding out about a pop quiz. By the time he’d explained the echo, how they hadn’t defeated It and It was back, their oath, the talking had died out to nothing.

In his ever-present need to fill the silence, Richie commented, “Well, that shit got dark fast. Thanks, Mike,” he said, exaggerating the end of his name. He looked to his left, trying to gauge how Eddie was handling all of that not-information. He was staring at the slip of paper from inside his fortune cookie, displeased. Richie reached over and rubbed Eddie’s shoulder lightly. “What?” he asked.

A breathy laugh escaped his lips. “My fortune just says ‘could’,” Eddie said, holding the paper between two fingers and rolling his eyes.

Richie cracked his open curiously. “They don’t know how to do fortune cookies here. Mine just says ‘guess’,” he said, showing the word to the group.

Without thinking, they each reached into the bowl and came up with

their own cookies and broke them open. Bill looked down at his own for a moment, furrowing his brows and popping half of the cookie into his mouth. "Eds, you wanna throw that over here?" he said, putting the word 'cut' down on the table in front of him. Ben tossed 'not' across to Bill. "What'd'ya get, Mikey?" he asked, before focusing in on the slip proffered between his friends' outstretched fingers. 'It.'

"Did you fuck with the fortune cookies, Mike?" Richie asked, suddenly tremendously aggravated.

"No! This isn't me," he protested. "This is-"

Eddie slammed his hand down on the table and stood up to see the words better. "This isn't fucking funny, man!" he interrupted.

Closing his eyes, Mike shook his head, trying to focus on his own words as the other guys began to speak over top of one another. "This is what It does!" he argued.

Richie leaned back in his chair and batted his hand vaguely towards the aligned papers. "What the fuck does that even mean?" he asked.

"Could it not cut," Eddie read.

Ben tapped at a word. "What about guess?" He'd never been big on puzzles like this. They'd always been more Stanley's forte and, fuck, did they need him right now.

The papers seemed to stare up at the Losers, begging to be put in the appropriate order. "I don't know," Bill admitted, sliding it into different positions, trying to make grammatical sense out of it. He was a writer, after all. This should have been in his wheelhouse.

"Guess it could not cut?" Eddie said after a moment, reaching across and flipping the order. It was a sentence, at least. It was a start.

With an affected sigh, Ben tossed his chopsticks into his plate with a clank. "What the fuck?" he whined.

Growing more and more annoyed, Richie pointed across the table at Mike. "This is so not fu-"

“Beverly?” Bill asked as he’d suddenly realized that she hadn’t said anything in quite a while. The steady stream of stunned tears gave him pause. His heart hammered in his chest as he plucked Bev’s slip from her fingers. His mouth slipped open ever so slightly.

Eddie leaned across the table and gasped. “Stanley,” he read, voice low. How the fuck did that happen and what the fuck was that supposed to mean? Eddie and Richie exchanged a concerned look before looking anywhere that wasn’t the papers, the three people scrambling to make sense of them, or Bev, whose silent tears had broken into stifled sobs. Richie grabbed her hand, wishing desperately that it was Eddie’s.

That was the missing piece, as it were, and they both had put it back in place as soon as it was revealed. The rest of the Losers took another moment. As soon as it clicked for Bill, he slid the name into its rightful place. From beside him, Mike read aloud, “Guess Stanley could not cut it.”

“What the fuck?” Ben whispered.

Eddie closed his eyes, not wanting to be the one to go where his mind had gone. Couldn’t cut it. He knew what he thought it meant, but he needed to hear it from someone else. “Why does it say Stanley?” he asked the ceiling.

He didn’t get time for an answer. As though an earthquake had just hit a fault line directly under the restaurant, the table began to rattle, sending the remaining fortune cookies clattering to the table. The group collectively slid back from the table, assessing the situation with their newly regained memories of Pennywise and his need for a good mindfuck. “Fuck is that, man?” Richie asked as one cookie began to nearly vibrate. It shattered, releasing an eyeball, complete with nerves and tendons that began to inch toward him. “Hey, that fortune cookie’s looking at me!” he shouted, backing up from the table as far as the wall would allow.

All sorts of hell broke out as the treats became tricks. Richie would have laughed about it, being the first weekend of October. Really, he would have. But as the black sludge, just like what had come pouring out of the vision of Eddie’s mouth in that fucking house so long ago,

came rushing out of the bowl, flooding the table, he couldn't particularly find anything funny.

"I don't wanna be here," Eddie said, from the corner across the room where he and Ben had set up camp. "I wanna go home," he rambled. He looked up at Richie desperately but was almost struck by a winged creature that had broken out of one of the cookies and was flying straight for the pair of them. "Holy shit!" Instinctively, Ben grabbed a menu and batted it away, sending it to the floor with a sickening squish. Instead of dying, like one would expect, it shook off the assault and split in two, careening back to fly around their faces.

Instinct kicked in, Richie moved to defend him. "Eddie!" He shouted trying to move around the table but found himself being lunged at by a creature with the face of a baby and the body of a scorpion. He moved to swat it away with a plate, but the thing elicited a blood-curdling screech. "Fuck!" He cursed, as more cookies hatched open to more demonic creatures; ashen, slimy birds snapped at the fingers fighting them off, blood-soaked snakes slithered down table legs to attempt binding their legs to the chairs, the fish tank filled with zombified piranhas. Every nightmarish thing they could have ever dreamed bloomed out of those fucking cookies. The sight was enough to turn them off Chinese takeout forever.

As they scattered about the room, fighting independently but together, a realization dawned on Mike. "It's not real!" He exclaimed. He picked up a chair and slammed it on the table. "It's not real," he repeated. Over and over he slammed the chair against the table until it slivered apart. Fragments of the ceramic dishes scattered into the air. Breathless, the Losers startled back to reality, finding the room safe and quiet, save for the repeated smashing from Mike.

"Everything okay in here?" the hostess asked, completely thrown by the sudden outburst from people she vaguely recognized.

Always the first to find words, Richie cleared his throat from where he was just about kneeling on the sideboard table. "Yeah," he answered, giving a fake smile. "Can we get the check?"

They were asked, quietly, because the manager recognized Bill from his book jacket photo, to leave. Richie and Bev both shoved credit

cards at the man to settle the bill and pay for damages. "Let me," she said, rolling up her sleeve to reveal the reminders of her fight with her husband. She gave a mirthless smile and tapped the plastic on the counter. Richie nodded, getting the picture. He wrapped her tightly in his arms and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. The bastard who hurt his Bev deserved a lot worse than a fucking dinner, a chair, and some glassware, but, he supposed, one mythical monster at a time. It first, then this fucking clown. Noting the bowl of matchboxes, Richie pocketed a couple for the road.

As the group made their way to the exit, Eddie tried to rationalize what had just happened. He didn't remember much of their first battle against the fucking clown, but what he did remember was the mind games. The leper. His mother in the basement of the pharmacy. "That's just what Pennywise does, right?" he said, tugging on Bill's jacket for attention before he turned back to Richie and Ben. "He's just fucking with us. Stanley's probably fine." He had to be right. They'd be able to feel it otherwise, wouldn't they?

"Wait, Mike, do you have Stan's number?" Bev asked as she dug her phone out of her purse.

"Yeah, here. It's..." they fell back, exchanging information and Bev started calling.

A set of little footsteps seemed to be following the rest of the group. "Hey, Richie!" called out an accompanying small voice.

He searched the group for Eddie, then took a step forward. "How..." he trailed off, unsure of what exactly he wanted to ask. "Uh. How do you know my name?"

The kid looked up at the four men with a vacant smile. "The fun's just beginning, right?"

Richie blinked at him, then took a step back, stumbling into Ben and Bill. "What? What did you just-"

Eddie gave an audible sigh and reached around to grab his arm to get

his attention. Bill put a hand on his shoulder and tugged back on him. "Richie, he's just a ki-"

"Listen, you think this is funny, right? You think this is some sort of game? Huh?" He shouted, bending down so he was at eye level with the boy.

Ben gave Eddie a protective shove backward, frustrating him further. Still, he uttered a low "Careful, Rich."

"What sort of sick joke is it playing now?" Mike whispered to Bill, catching up with them.

He shook his head, leaning back against him. "Why single Richie out like this?" he asked. "Kids aren't something I'd expect to be a fear for Richie."

Pushing his way past Ben, Eddie tried desperately to make himself heard. "Richie, it's a-"

"I'M NOT AFRAID OF YOU!" Richie yelled, earning himself some concerned looks from the patrons of the restaurant. What kind of jerkoff screams at a kid? A traumatized one, and Richie definitely fit the bill.

The kid took it like a champ, though. He blinked at Richie like he had totally lost it, unaware, obviously, of the scene they'd just made. "The fun is just beginning. The line from your act, dude," he said, unimpressed. "I'm a fan."

Richie went slack-jawed. He heard the telltale sounds of a hand hitting a forehead and knew it was Eddie. Instead of addressing the matter, he shifted into his awkward, caught by a fan personality. "You want a picture?"

Taking a step back, the kid seemed completely disgusted by the thought. "No, I think I'm good," he said. *Was a fan* was probably more accurate, Richie thought absently, rubbing at his brow. It was a good thing that Derry wasn't a paparazzi town because if it had been L.A., there would have been at least half a dozen headlines with

Washed Up Has Been Comic Richie Tozier Screams At Poor Innocent Child by the time they got back to the townhouse, complete with a trending tag on Twitter, calling out #CancelTozier to the universe.

“Great job, Rich,” Ben said, clapping his hand on his shoulder.

Richie hung his head and slumped his shoulders sadly. “Come on,” Eddie coached, tugging his elbow lightly. He shook his head, a little amused by the stupidity of the moment.

“How did you forget a line from your own show, dude?” Ben continued to chastise.

And there it was. Another topic he’d been secretly dreading. He closed his eyes, allowing Eddie to push him out the doors. “I don’t write my own material,” he admitted.

“I told you that was gonna bite you in the ass one day,” Eddie teased, nudging their shoulders together.

“It would be better if you kissed my ass instead,” he sniped, earning a round of raucous round of laughter from their friends.

Sliding into his best interpretation of his flustered, tormented youth, he gave him a harder shove, “Fuck you, man.”

“Right back at’cha, Spaghetti,” Richie delivered with a wink. I love you, too. Thank you for having my back.

The six stood in the parking lot, nearer to the back of Richie and Eddie’s car. Richie drew out one of the boxes of matches and broke open the first pack of smokes, lighting one and taking a long slow drag. As Bev paced up and down the length of the car, redialing Stan’s number over and over, she gestured to Richie for a hit. Just like old times, he thought, smiling sadly.

Eddie bounced nervously on the balls of his feet. “Pick up. Pick up, pick up, pick up, pick up, pick up,” he chanted, deciding that was his new mantra until someone managed to get in touch with the last remaining Loser. “Shit,” he hissed when she hung up and dialed again. “Hey, Bev, gimme the number, too,” he called out, walking over to her.

“Here,” she said, popping her phone onto speaker and keeping the screen active so Eddie could copy the digits into his own phone.

Feeling a little more comfortable with the fact that he had the number too, he felt his body relax. “Thanks.”

“What the fuck, man?” Richie said, turning to face Mike, unable to control his simmering rage any longer.

Bev moved toward her own rental and called over her shoulder. “I’m gonna keep calling. I’ll see you guys back at the Townhouse,” she said.

As though it was second nature, Ben moved alongside her. “I’ll come with.” Bill waved goodbye in recognition as Eddie and Richie both turned their attention solely to Mike.

“You fucking lied to us, man. That’s not okay,” Eddie said, hands flinging up like he might have wanted to strangle Mike. Instead, he just clenched his fists and turned around in a tight circle.

Richie’s anger was much less quiet now. “You know, the first words out of your mouth should have been ‘Hey man, you wanna come to Derry and get murdered?’ Then, I could have said no without having wasted a trip across the fucking country,” he yelled, arms waving dramatically. “But you know, *thanks for that*.” He gave a sarcastic little salute as punctuation.

“Richie, I-”

“No. Its fucking entrapment is what it is,” he said, not in the mood to hear any more from Derry’s personal grim fucking reaper.

Eddie felt quite similarly. He shrugged, gesturing in the direction to which Bev and Ben had driven off. “And now, fucking Stanley? Without him, we’re all dead.” He locked eyes with their friend and shook his head. “It’s gotta be all or nothing, man, you know that.”

Pleading, Mike looked over to Bill for support, finding none. He was still facing the street, arms folded around himself. Mike reached out to put shaking hands on both Richie and Eddie’s shoulders. “Look, I

have a plan and-”

“I have a plan,” Richie interrupted, throwing his hands up in defeat. “Getting the fuck out of dodge before this ends worse than one of Bill’s books. Who’s with me?” he asked raising his own hand in a mock vote and stepping out of arm’s reach. He shot a look at Eddie, only to find his hand up as well and breathed a sigh of relief. He wasn’t sure why he’d expected anything different, but he was glad to see that there was no reason to worry. They were going home.

“We made a promise,” Mike said, as though that made any difference.

“So, let’s unmake it!” Richie shouted.

“Richie, other p-p-people are gonna die,” Bill said sadly without turning around.

Floored by their unwillingness to see his side, Richie took another step back. “Other people die every day! We don’t own this town shit,” he spat, rubbing at his fingertips desperately and trying to ignore the way his heart seemed to threaten to hammer its way right out of his ribcage. “Plus, I just remembered we grew up here like two hours ago, so fuck this. I’m out,” he yelled, turning to their car and chirping it open, disappearing inside.

Unable to hear it anymore, Eddie patted his friend on the arm. “Sorry, Mikey. I’m with Richie.” He headed for the car and took a deep breath, fighting off the tightening of his chest. *Fuck, I need an inhaler.*

On the edge of tears, Mike called after him. “Eds, please...”

“What?” he barked, turning around for what he hoped was the last time. “We stay, we die, that’s it?” That couldn’t be it. He should have fucking listened to Richie. *God*, he was going to be in for the worst *I Told You So* of his life for the entire trip home. But that was just it. Home was where he needed to be. Home, with Richie. Home, safe with Richie. “I’m going back to the Inn. I’m gonna pack up my shit. And I’m going *home*.” Seeing the wordless desperation on Mike’s face, he almost folded, but his sense of self-preservation was just a little too strong for that. “I’m sorry, man. Good luck,” he called over his

shoulder as he disappeared into the vehicle and closed the door. He took Richie's hand in his, then added, "Go."

Not one to have to be told *that* twice, Richie threw the car in reverse and took off, peeling out of the parking lot and through the streets of Derry. "Let's get the fuck out of here," he grumbled. He squeezed Eddie's hand a little tighter, as though trying to make up for the fact that he hadn't been able to do so all night.

If they'd stuck around a moment longer, they might have heard Mike's panicked shout. "Eddie, please wait! Eddie!" Might have, but they didn't. Even if they had, it would have done Mike no good. Their minds were made up. They reached the Townhouse in half the time it had taken them to get to the restaurant, threw the car in park, and sped inside as though having maintained their kinetic energy from the ride over.

Richie stomped up the stairs ahead of the other three Losers, long legs carrying him to their room effortlessly. "What the fuck?" he cursed, hauling their empty suitcases up onto the bed, tossing Eddie's toiletry bag to or maybe *at* him as he finally caught up and entered the room. "I knew we shouldn't have come back here," he said. He braced himself on the dark wooden footboard for a moment, then turned to the dresser.

"I'm sorry I made us come," Eddie answered as he made his way into the bathroom, sweeping everything off the counter back into it unceremoniously. He took a look in the mirror. For just a moment, the lines on his face, that he'd never had a problem with before, threw him for a loop. It was almost as though he expected to see his teenage reflection instead.

Piling the neatly folded clothes into the bags, he shook his head, as though he could see him. "No, you didn't make us anything. We both knew it had to happen." It was true. They had to come back. They had to find out what he wanted. The thing was, they were under no obligation to actually fucking help with it. It was a fucking suicide mission. He almost laughed when he came across the tacky tie-dye t-shirt from a touristy hot dog shop he'd gotten once while on tour, wondering why, if they'd decided no one was going to know they were a thing, Eddie would have packed a shirt for Richie that said

‘Get Sauced by Eddie’s Footlong Weiners’ with a remarkably phallic cartoony hot dog on the back. That was about as subtle as a hole in the face. He shoved it down in the bag, then added, “Mike, on the other hand, is off the fucking deep end if he thinks we’re gonna stick around to watch them all die.”

Thinking it over, Eddie stopped cold in his tracks. “Can you live with that?” he asked. He didn’t think he could. Even if they never saw them again, he couldn’t help but imagine the pang of remorse he’d hear learning about the Death Of Horror Author Bill Denbrough and his Tragic Past or the Disappearance Of Reclusive Architect Ben Hanscom Inexplicably Linked To The Unforeseen Circumstances Surrounding Fashion Designer Beverly Marsh’s So-Called Accident. Worse, he thought about Mike. He lived his life in anonymity. The news of his death would never make it to them.

“Live with what?” Richie asked, not seeing the problem.

He peeked his head out of the bathroom door, leaning against the frame. “Knowing that if they all die, it’s our fault,” he answered. Richie looked at him like he was nuts, but he still asked: “Is that something you’re just okay with?”

He moved to him and rested his hand on the side of his neck. “Babe, yesterday, we didn’t even know they existed, past some sort of weird phantom pain walking past the ladies’ section at Macy’s or flipping through the mystery books on your Kindle.” He took a step back, subconsciously distancing himself from the situation. He folded his arms tightly across his middle and hung his head, toeing the faded carpet. “It’s not like they’re really our friends anymore.”

Eddie balked. He knew Richie wasn’t insensitive, but fuck if that didn’t sound like the most callous pile of shit he’d ever heard. “That’s not true and you know it.” He followed Richie back into the bedroom and stood in front of him, dangerously close. “Everything fell back into place tonight and I don’t know if I can watch the news next week and see ‘Mystery Author, Fashion Designer, Architect, and Unknown Assailant-’ because you know that’s how it’ll be framed- ‘Found Maimed In Gruesome Murder-Suicide’ and just sip my coffee like nothing fucking happened,” he said, unloading each word faster than the last because he didn’t trust himself to say it all if he stopped.

That wasn't enough. Although the idea of Derry being hit with a Dateline investigation, or even better, a shitty true crime special on Oxygen or something, felt like comedic gold. Still, Richie leveled with himself, it probably wouldn't even affect him past the notoriety of ¾ of the characters because he wouldn't remember that he knew them or the town. He stopped for a moment to ponder if his mind would even recognize the inevitable Penis-unwise shaped plot holes in the story. "Provided we even remember by the time we pass the county fucking line," he argued.

"Do you want to forget them again?" Eddie asked, a little shocked by it. Now that the Losers were back in his mind, where they'd always been in his heart, he didn't want to lose them from either place. It wasn't fair.

Richie didn't see it that way. Instead, he grew a little bit more frustrated. "Right now, kind of!" he barked, instantly regretting the sharpness in his tone. It wasn't true. He knew it. Eddie knew it. The only thing he really wanted was to get the fuck away from this place and be someplace far, far away, where their lives could go back to normal for however long they could. If they went home, he wouldn't have to worry about this.

"Richie-" Eddie said, reaching out for him.

Instantly, he melted into Eddie's touch, then shrugged it off, kicking himself for wasting time. "Fuck. No," he said, turning back to the suitcases on the bed, "let's just get our shit and go." Eddie took his hand in his and stared into his deep blue eyes. Richie sighed. He couldn't resist the 'talk to me' face. "I want to go home, babe. There's this..." he stared at their entwined hands. "I can't explain it. I don't want to explain it. I just want to go home and go back to our lives."

"Okay." As much as Richie couldn't resist Eddie's wordless empathy, Eddie couldn't resist Richie's open vulnerability. Each was so rare sometimes, they'd come to cherish it. "Okay, we'll go," he said, caving in.

Richie leaned down and kissed him deeply, gratefully. "Let's get our shit and get the fuck out of here," he breathed, keeping Eddie tight in his arms and making no moves to leave.

Eddie puffed out a little laugh. "Shame we never got to christen the bed," he said, quirked his eyebrow up slightly.

"Babe, we'll join the fucking mile-high club on the way home. I just want out of here right now," Richie answered, turning down sex for what might have been the first time in his life. God, he was getting old, wasn't he?

With a shrug, Eddie let his hands trail down to Richie's ass, giving it a rough squeeze before retreating back to the bathroom. "Okay," he acquiesced, quietly wondering if it was joining if they'd done it on airplanes at least a half a dozen times over the last 20 years.

They finished up their packing and Richie took off with just his duffel, looking to round up Ben and Bev so that they could all have a fighting chance. If Bill and Mike were going to rekindle their love and go down fighting a fucking clown, so be it. He wasn't staying to watch. He sped down the steps and found them in the bar. "Whatever you guys are talking about, let's make it happen faster, alright? We gotta go," he said, signaling them with the wrap it up gesture, then turning back to the stairs, calling up to Eddie. "¡Vamos, Eduardo. Ándale, ándale!"

He turned back to encourage them, *politely* and *not-at-all panicked or pushy*, to get their shit together but froze as Ben continued, ignoring Richie entirely. "There's something you're not telling us. You know that Stanley died. You know it. I know it." His jaw dropped. He wondered if they knew he was there at all. "What I need to know is how."

Richie could all but hear the record scratch. "Wait. What?"

"I can't do this," Bev whispered, throwing her hands up in defeat and leaving the room, heading to the desk for a key to the room she already had.

Unable to believe his ears, Richie followed along beside Ben. "Stanley's dead?" He rubbed at his hands a little as they trailed Bev. "Shit. What the fuck..." When they caught up to her, he reached for her hand and turned her to face him. She tried hard not to notice the panic in his eyes, but it was damn near impossible, given that they

were still magnified behind thick glasses. “Stan’s dead? Is that what you just said?” he asked. She wrenched her hand free and went into the next room, sitting in a small leather chair and lighting up a cigarette, uncaring of the posted no smoking signs.

An outsider could have easily mistaken Ben and Bev for the couple in the room. The ease with which he followed her, as though he knew where she was going, was stunning. “You can’t just walk away from this,” he said, kneeling before her. “What makes you think that he killed himself?” Tears began to stream from her eyes and Ben immediately regretted asking, but they had to know. They deserved to know. “Bev...” he whispered softly.

“Killed himself?” Richie squawked. Stanley had killed himself? No. No, that couldn’t be right. He couldn’t accept that as an answer. Stanley was... He didn’t know what Stanley the grown-up was like, but the Stan he knew would never.

Ben rested his hands on her knees and looked up at her, face sincere. “Talk to me,” he asked, continuing to beg for the information she was hiding. It was clear enough to Richie, even through his panic, that that wasn’t all he was asking for. He and Eddie had had this argument a couple of times, not that talking was ever really an issue for them, but he did, occasionally, have his feelings under lock and key... behind walls that were under cement and protected by armed guards behind fences with biometric scanners. “Come on, just talk to me like we used to. How do you know?”

“Because I saw it. I’ve seen all of us die.”

And just like that, she’d successfully sucked all of the air out of the room. Where does a conversation even go from there? Richie’s heart skipped a beat. Both of the men stared at her, stunned. Ben rested back on his heels mouth opening and closing uselessly. Richie leaned back against the doorframe, still trying to process.

“Okay, I just gotta grab my toiletries bag and then we can go,” Eddie said, dropping the suitcases at the foot of the stairs and startling all three of them. Their heads snapped to him and his eyes darted between. His gaze settled on Richie and he asked tentatively, “What did I miss?”

3. Talk To The Wind, Talk To The Sky, Talk To The Man With The Reasons Why

Summary for the Chapter:

Learning about Bev's visions and departing on the beginning of their search for their own items, the Losers start to regain bits of their pasts faster than ever, starting with news of Stan's death... or so they think?

The Derry Townhouse was still, lifeless. For a place that held four recently reunited friends who'd shared some serious trauma, there was no camaraderie. Bev sat in the same chair she'd crashed into. Ben sat hugging his knees at her feet. Richie stood behind the bar, lining up glasses and pouring scotch- was it scotch? Who could tell with so much dust on the bottle?

Eddie, however, paced the room maniacally. In most situations, he was fidgety at best. This was not a best-case scenario. This was... this was worst-case scenario multiplied by the things people think of to kill their enthusiasm. "When you say that you've seen us all die?" he asked. He covered his eyes with the hand that wasn't resting balled on his hip.

"Yeah, honestly, Bev," Richie said, sliding one glass down to Eddie before leaning against the bar, "that's a fucked-up thing to just drop on somebody."

She'd been unable to stop herself from crying. Even Ben's historically calming presence, his strong hand rubbing her leg, didn't seem to help. "I have nightmares," she admitted sheepishly. "Every night since Derry. People in pain, people dying." She stammered over the last word and then looked up at Richie. If her memory served, the fuzzy outline of her sarcastic partner in crime was shaping up to be Richie. If she was one to pray, she would have done so. Instead, she'd settled for hoping that she was right. That he'd be on her side.

There was no time to see if she was right. Eddie cut her off quickly. "So? You have nightmares. So what? I have nightmares. People..."

he glanced at Richie, not wanting to reveal that he did, too. Worse even than his. Sometimes, he would wake up screaming and the only way Eddie could get him to calm would be to lay almost completely on top of him. But now wasn't the time to open the discussion about their bedtime habits. Judging by the way Richie was rubbing at his fingers, Eddie could guess that it wasn't the time to talk about much of anything. They were so close to leaving. They had to get this mess sorted out, then get back to getting out of here. This trip was over. He returned to his rant, speeding on: "We all have nightmares. After the shit we dealt with as kids, it's a fucking blessing nightmares are all we have. That doesn't make them *visions* or *prophecies* or *true* or anything like that. That doesn't mean that Stan's dead." His hands started to flail as his speech's patter ramped up intensity almost as much as his heart rate did. "He would never kill himself and it's really seriously fucked up for you to even insinuate it. He's our friend, too, and if he's not here, he's got a perfectly good reason." He was on the verge of shouting, then, and Bev flinched. Ben looked up at her, then Eddie and shook his head, silently asking him to tone it down. He did. But barely. "He probably knew what we were up against and, as usual, was the only one of the seven of us in possession of more than two fucking brain cells to rub together and said no and Mike just didn't want to fucking tell us so we all feel like there's a higher pressure to us staying." He gestured at the door and gritted his teeth. *Fucking Mike*. "Give me one reason, one *good* reason to believe that what you're saying is true, Bev." He stopped, meaning to be done. Really, he did. But he looked at Ben's truly concerned expression and just couldn't take it. "I mean, let's face it, it's not like you'd have known that these dreams were us. How do you expect any of us to take this seriously when you're just *sitting* there like that and *won't explain anything* !" When she still didn't answer, he threw his hands in the air and shoved himself up onto the barstool, sliding his, now empty, glass back to Richie for a refill.

"You're speaking in italics, again, Eds," he said, patting him on the hand lightly as he tipped the bottle into the glass.

He looked up at his partner, trying to gauge where he was at with the whole thing. "Fuck you, dude," he said, his brown eyes locked on Richie's magnified blue ones.

Shaking his head, Richie gripped the edge of the bar instead of Eddie's hand. "No, fuck you-" he answered, fighting his every impulse to do something dramatic, like sweep Eddie into a fireman's carry and deposit him in the car before speeding off into the dark, never to be seen again. They could live in the woods or something. Those Alaskan people did it and they're fairly sane... ish. Except for the one that climbs trees and howls and shit. He'd probably be one that wouldn't get a passing grade from a psychiatrist.

Feeling a little more solid, Bev chanced her voice. "I've watched every single one of us..."

"Watched every single one of us what?" came a voice from the doorway. They jumped, still on edge from dinner. Ben grabbed a fire poker from near the mantle and turned. Eddie jumped off the stool and clambered to brandish it like a lion tamer's chair.

Richie was the first one to get his wits about him. He gave the man supporting himself on the door frame a once over and immediately found himself washed with relief. He tore out from behind the bar and wrapped him in his arms. "Stan. What the fuck man? Do you not answer your phone or..." Richie trailed off. He pulled back to hold his friend at arm's length and take a good look at him but felt the wind knocked out of him when Stan winced. Richie took a look at where his hands had grasped, seeing the tail end of gauze wraps on both of his wrists sticking out from under his hoodie. He thumbed the edge down to cover it so no one else would see, which Stan was grateful for. He pulled him back into a tight hug and rocked the pair of them back and forth. "God, what the fuck?" he asked, voice more breath than tone.

"I..." Stan said, looking around at the other three, who were all in tears, but couldn't take his eyes off of Bev. She looked utterly astounded and heartbroken and so confused. "Uh. I don't want to talk about it, but I'm here now. I'm here and I'm gonna fight with you guys," he said as Richie finally backed off. "We're Losers, so what do we have to lose, right?" *I'm a loser. And no matter what, I always fucking will be.* He moved further into the room and squeezed Eddie and Ben's shoulders on his way to Bev, wrapping her in a tight embrace. He didn't have to ask. She saw. He knew she saw. If he hadn't known walking in that she did, her grip on the back of his

shirt confirmed it.

She let out a shaky breath, burying her face in his neck. He was *there*. She could feel his pulse on her cheek. “Hi,” she whispered, standing to make the hug easier on him. “Oh my God, Stan. Hi,” she repeated. She couldn’t help the weeping now. She was so relieved to have been wrong. She didn’t understand how, but she was wrong.

When he’d finally greeted all four of them, Stan realized that he probably needed to get up to speed. “So, what did I miss?” Noticing the way Bev was staring at his wrists, he shoved his hands into his pockets, snapping her back into the moment.

Slipping into a darker tone of voice akin to a TV announcer, Richie answered, “This week on Derry Unsolved, Bev saw you die,” he said, giving him a Vanna White arm, “or apparently not.” He then turned to list the night’s developments on his fingers. “Ben’s hot now. We’re never eating Chinese food again. I’m a psychopath who screams at pre-teens who like my comedy, which- *side note*: why the fuck did those parents have their two little kids out for dinner at 11:30 on a school night anyway? We were closing the place down as it was, so what was their deal?” Richie scoffed, realizing that he sounded a little too close to Will Smith explaining why the only target he shot was the 8-year-old girl with pigtails and the stack of quantum physics books. “Like, excuse me for automatically assuming the little creep who should have been in bed hours before and was wholly out of place was in the wrong. But, I digress: We have to kill Pennywise. Bill and Mike are who-the-fuck-knows-where doing who-the-fuck-knows-what. Bill apparently hadn’t stuttered in years, but it came back tonight. Eddie and I are leaving.” Perhaps it wasn’t the most comprehensive list Richie could have come up with, but that was the best he could do on short notice.

Eddie rolled his eyes. “Richie... Is now the time to-”

“Yes,” he answered. Now was just about the only time he could think of. He turned to Eddie and tugged him by the cuff of his jacket toward the hallway where their bags were still sitting. “Let’s just get out of here and-”

There was an audible sigh from across the room. “Have you two

started with this shit already?” Stan folded his arms and shook his head. “I’m not mentally clear enough for your bickering. For the love of all things good in this rotten world, shut the hell up. Both of you.” He turned on his heel to face the other two. He locked eyes with the man sitting on the arm of Beverly’s chair. “Ben, since you are clearly the only one who’s in any shape to talk, catch me up here. Why aren’t the rest of us seeing our deaths?” He opened his mouth to answer but didn’t do it in time.

Richie nodded. “Yeah, what makes her so different?” *Who invited Molly Ringwald into the group?* This time, he wasn’t met with a one-finger salute. She merely looked at him, unable to answer. He didn’t want it to sound like an attack on Bev, but he just didn’t get it.

“The Deadlights,” came Mike’s voice from the hall.

Just like that, flashes of that day in the cistern occurred to each of them. The three orbs surrounded by teeth. Bev, white-eyed, floating. *You’ll float too!* Someone kissing her awake. Even in their mind’s eye, the lights were blinding, too-sharp and too-bright.

The five of them turned around to see that, at some point, both Mike and Bill had made their way into the conversation. “She w-w-w-was the only one of us that got c-c-caught in them that day,” Bill reminded, moving in next to Bev and staring at Stan, shocked.

“We were all touched by them,” Mike said, pacing the room. It felt like they were all back in school listening to some teacher drone on. “It rooted in each of us like an infection...” Eddie flinched instinctively, leaning back against the bar and folding his arms across his chest. Great. “A virus. You understand?” Mike reached for Eddie who shrugged him off and moved across the room, sharing a wordless glance with Richie. Unfortunately, he understood the metaphor. He nodded, wishing he hadn’t. It still made his skin crawl to think about it. “Slowly, that virus, it’s been growing for 27 years, metastasizing.”

Stan took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. His head was pounding and he really, desperately didn’t want to have this conversation. “Okay, fine. So if it’s going to kill us all, and Bev saw me slash my wrists in the bathtub-” he heard the group start to

murmur and caught a sad expression wash over Ben. He pointed at him with the arm of his frames and added, "And don't look at me like that, I've seen you staring since I got here, I'll shove the sweater up so you can see, okay?" He did. The gauze spanned the entire distance of his forearms. The stark white cloth was startling. "If Bev saw that, why didn't I die? Why didn't it work?" He asked, looking directly at Mike for answers. When none came, he grumbled, "Can't even fucking kill myself properly?"

After a moment's stunned silence, "Beep beep, Stan," Richie said, voice low and clearly hurt.

Eddie puffed out a laugh and the corners of Stan's mouth twitched up into a sad sort of smile. It was all too absurd, and the fact that no one else had made the comment, too? He glanced around to find that the other Losers didn't seem amused at all.

"Jesus Christ, Rich," Ben responded, eyes wide.

"What, like I was going to let that opportunity pass?" he said. Both Bev and Bill nodded like that would have been the obvious choice. Mike simply shook his head, knowing that he'd waited his whole life for the chance to beep someone else. It was a fair comment, but still one that deserved a beep of his own. He shrugged one shoulder and looked at his friends. "I was just saying what everyone was thinking." Stan had gone too far with that comment. The questions were one thing, but combining the rest...

A thought came crashing over Eddie. Something must have been different from her vision to what actually happened. He asked them to compare and, it turned out that, in Bev's version Stanley and his wife had been home alone. In reality, their daughter had been home, too, and needed to get something out of the bathroom and had sent her mother in to retrieve it. Stan had been found. "So, what if everything Beverly sees is a near miss. If it's something we can change; that we can prevent," he suggested, a little excited to know that they had a way out of it. If Bev said she saw him die in a plane crash, he'd never fly again. Simple. If she said she saw Richie choke to death, Eddie would have him on a liquid diet in a heartbeat. No problems.

"No, I don't think it works like that," she answered sadly. The dreams had morphed over the years, but now that she looked back on them, they'd been kaleidoscopic at best. In the earliest forms, it was Richie in Stan's place. Young, heartbroken, and alone. After a couple of years, presumably around the time he and Eddie had moved out, the space had been occupied by Ben for a short while. He'd go clutching a paper from his wallet she had never been able to make out the words on. But that had been the briefest one, only lasting a couple of months. Stanley had been the next to occupy that nightmare, and it stayed that way for years. The one thing that never changed, however, was the order. The same seven deaths shuffling through the same seven people. Stan would go first, then Eddie, then Mike, then Richie, then Bev, then Bill, then, finally, she would go. It was a sick rotation and she would have done anything to make it go away. She couldn't... If it stayed the way it was, Eddie wouldn't be far behind.

Increasingly frustrated by her unwillingness to open up about her visions, he came very close to snapping again but thought better of it. He turned away, rubbing his neck and closing his eyes. "Then, what, Bev?"

"We have to stop it," Mike said, his tone final.

"How the hell are we supposed to do that?" Stan asked.

Bill scanned the room slowly. He knew they were going to flip when he suggested it, but he had to. After what he'd seen, after what Mike had shown him, he knew there was no other way. "The R-r-ritual of Chüd," he said quietly, almost hoping no one would hear him.

That *can't* be right, Eddie thought. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. It's not like this was one of his books. There was no way he was actually suggesting what he thought he was. "The what?" he asked, hoping he had misheard.

"The Ritual of Chüd," Mike repeated, adding gravitas to the situation through another person's insistence. "The Shokopiwah, the first people who fought It, they have a saying. 'All living things must abide by the laws of the shape they inhabit,'" he answered.

Richie was floored. “A tribal ritual? Are you fucking kidding me, man?” He circled from behind the bar to square off with Mike a little. “No, there’s- there’s gotta be another way!” He looked around at the rest of his friends, frustrated that they couldn’t see it too. “I mean, what, this thing comes back every 27 years?” Mike nodded, confirming his thoughts. “So, let’s kick the can down the road another turn. We’ll do it then!”

The numbers ran through Eddie’s mine. 27 years from now... “Wait. We’ll be 70 years old, asshole!”

“Dude,” he answered. *Be on my side, here. I want to go home*, he thought.

Bev shook her head, catching Richie’s attention. “It doesn’t work that way. None of us make it another 20 years even, and...” she looked him in the eye, and tried to get him to catch her meaning, “the way it happens...” She swallowed thickly, unable to say what she wanted to. She needed him to just get it. Like he used to. “Richie, I...”

It didn’t take much for them to get the gist. Ben leaned forward, pushing his hair back out of his eyes. “So, if we don’t get It this cycle, then...”

“We die.” Bill finished his sentence. He didn’t know if Ben would have been able to and they all needed to hear it. They needed to hear the consequences.

“Horribly,” Eddie added.

Eyes comically wide, Richie poured himself another scotch. “Yeah, I don’t need the ‘horribly’ part, b...” he caught himself slipping and morphed babe into a rushed “bastard.”

Pacing again, Eddie shot his hand out toward Bev. “I didn’t say it, she did.”

Bill looked at his friends, all reunited in front of him and couldn’t help but feel a little more comfortable than he had, even when Mike had brought him back to his apartment and shown him his plan. “Alright, guys, look. I’ve seen w-w-w-w-what he’s talking about. It’s,

uh-” he sighed, realizing how bizarre it sounded, especially coming from him. “It’s all true. It’s the only way. If we want this ritual to work-” he glanced up at Mike, almost like he was getting another section of his childhood back. He stumbled back a little and shoved his hands into his pockets.

“We have to remember,” Mike finished for him. He did his best not to look hurt by the way Bill had withdrawn, but he knew they had something bigger to deal with first.

Luckily, their interaction went unnoticed by the rest of the group. “Remember what?” Richie snapped, pulling them back to reality.

“Everything,” Mike answered. “Look, let’s get some sleep,” he said, patting Eddie and Bill on the shoulders. “We’ll meet back down here in the morning. First light, okay?”

“Fine,” Bev breathed, fumbling in her purse desperately for her cigarettes before moving out onto the patio.

Bill swallowed his fear and gave a tense, “Sure.” *He thrusts his fists against the posts, and still insists he sees the ghosts. He thrusts his fists against the posts, and still insists he sees the ghosts. He thrusts his fists against the posts, and still insists he sees the ghosts.* The old tongue twister ran through his mind again and again as he took his leave.

Ben watched Beverly out the front window for a moment, then nodded up at Mike, retreating to his room.

A trademark eye-roll accompanied Stan’s placid “Whatever.” He followed after Ben, catching up to him easily. He still wanted to hear what he’d missed, and even after all that, the only person he thought might have an objective stance would be him.

Well, that was most of them. Mike turned back to the two left in the room. “Eds?” he asked carefully, hoping he wouldn’t flip out on him again like he had in the parking lot earlier.

He couldn’t bring himself to look at him and, instead, cast a look back at Richie. “Yeah, fine,” he answered with a barely perceptible shrug. He jerked his head toward the stairs and headed up them

quickly.

“Richie?” he asked, almost too late. Richie simply flipped him off over his shoulder as he followed Eddie up to their room. That was as good an answer as any. Somehow, though, Mike found himself alone again. Naturally.

When they reached the door, Eddie just about tugged him through it before returning to his pacing. He made two laps around the bed before throwing himself onto it. “This sucks,” he said, tugging his shoes off and not even bothering to change his clothes. What difference did it make when they were heading back out again in less than half the time they normally slept. “Where do you think he’s gonna take us?”

Richie kicked off his shoes and jeans and did the same, climbing in bed beside Eddie. “Hell,” he answered, only half-joking. He pulled Eddie in flush against his chest and pulled the covers up over them. Had Maine always been this cold? It was fall and all, but still. L.A. must have made him soft.

Instinctively, Eddie moved as close to Richie as possible. “No, we’re already there. Be more specific,” he said, resting his hand on his partner’s neck. The small bed, compared to everyone they’d shared since leaving Derry, felt so reminiscent of the one in his childhood bedroom, it almost felt like second nature. Almost. But, not really. Not when everything about their childhood still seemed blurry, like they were trying to view it from the bottom of the quarry.

“I don’t know, babe. That’s the whole point isn’t it?” he groaned, draping his arm over Eddie’s middle. He rested his head against Eddie’s and enjoyed the moment, grateful for however much time they could spend together alone. “We don’t remember, so we’re gonna do god knows what at first light.” They were quiet for a moment, each lost independently in thought, trying to work through what the morning could bring. “I miss when Bill was the de facto leader,” he mused. “At least it seemed like there was a reason for the stupid shit. There was a sympathy point or two. This is just Mikey clinging to the past and getting us all killed.” He took off his glasses and put them on the bedside table.

Eddie smarted at the thought of them all dying. Especially after that conversation with Bev? No. No, he wouldn't hear of it. And he wouldn't have Richie entertaining that thought either. "You can't think that," he said, thumbing over the coarse stubble on Richie's jawline.

The way Richie saw it, that was all it could be. From what he could piece together about the last time- *And how fucked up was that to say? Here they were, about to fight an actual Killer Clown From Outer Space, and they had a framework for how to handle it!* - It brought all your worst fears to life. When they were younger, they'd had fairly reasonable, tactile fears; movie monsters, lepers, creepy statues, blood, fire, spiders, all the normal things. Now that they were adults, the fears were personal and abstract; loss, fear, repression. "Why not?" he asked, hoping Eddie would have a real, honest-to-God reason.

Eddie stammered for a moment, struggling to word the feeling he had in the pit of his stomach. After a pause, he said, "Because, this thing operates off of belief." He received a vague, 'are-you-kidding-me-babe' stare from Richie. Not particularly in the mood to do any sort of heavy lifting to convince him, he just reworded his statement. "If you believe it, it'll happen."

"Okay, then," Richie sighed, looking at a point that was probably above the eyes of the Eddie shaped blur in front of him, "I believe with every fiber of my being that you are gonna kiss me, then everything around here is going to start making sense." He squeezed his eyes shut tight. When Eddie didn't move to make that happen, he opened one eye and puckered his lips. Eddie sighed and gave in, kissing him sweetly. "Half right, I guess."

With a smile, he rolled onto his back and set the alarm on his phone, then turned off the light, snuggling into Richie's outstretched arm. "I'm setting my alarm for 6:15."

Richie groaned and covered his face with the crook of his arm. "I'm going to kill Mike myself."

They lay in silence for a while, trying to catch some sleep, not knowing when they'd get the chance again. Eventually, though, it

was Eddie that broke the silence, unable to quiet his mind. "How is the fuck you plan working out on your end?" he asked.

"Finding ways to do it where I don't sound like a total asshole is complicated," he said turning onto his side in a vain attempt to make out Eddie's outline, "but fine, I guess."

Mirroring his position, Eddie smiled a tentative smile. "Good," he said, pulling him closer and kissing him again before melting against him. "Fuck you, Richie."

"No," Richie countered, interrupting him. "We're alone. I'm not playing this game when we're alone." Relying on muscle memory, he put his hands on the sides of Eddie's face. "I love you," he said, his voice low and serious. It startled Eddie to his core.

"I love you, too," he said, leaning in to kiss him again, this time long and languid. They stayed that way. They slept that way, entwined like the Valdaro Lovers until Eddie's phone jarred them back awake.

Their morning routines were fairly normal, save the lack of coffee. They went down to join the others in the lobby, finding themselves to be the last ones to show, despite the sky still being pitch black. Truthfully, it didn't look like anyone else had slept at all.

Even once they'd started their trek, Mike didn't really give them any details. As they walked, Eddie caught up with him. "Remind me again why you didn't come with us," he asked, a little shorter than he'd meant to.

Mike seemed thrown. He hadn't expected them to hold on to that. "Because," he started, staring at his feet as he walked. "Someone had to remember." He looked at Eddie carefully out of the corner of his eye. "Someone had to."

Richie wasn't far behind. He fell in step with them and slung his arm over Eddie's shoulder to look across him at his friend. "No, Mike. This literally didn't have to happen. It didn't have to be us," he said cautiously.

"Yes, it did," Mike said, hanging his head.

Richie shook his head. "Dude, it really fucking didn't!" he snapped. He balled his fist in Eddie's shirt and stared at him incredulously. "If this has been happening every 27 years for who the fuck knows how long, it didn't have to be us!" He could feel everyone else's eyes on him and quieted. "You can't tell me other people haven't tried to stop It. What makes you think we can?" He really, sincerely wanted to know. There was no malice, no spite. He just genuinely wanted an answer.

He took a deep breath, readying himself for the response he knew awaited him. "Because I know how to stop It," he said, as firmly as he could.

"Do you?" he answered, voice pitching higher. That didn't sound reasonable to Richie at all. "Because, honestly, man, I'm--"

"Alright, enough," Ben interjected while keeping an eye on Stan. He didn't have a reason, he supposed, but he was unable to stop himself. Stanley seemed like he was floating, there but not *really*, and it made his soul ache. "Where are we going, Mike?" he asked, finally allowing himself to do the simple task he'd hoped his friends would find their way to.

Mike's response was a simple, short request. "Just trust me."

But that...

That was too much. After what he was asking of them, calling them back here, no. Eddie released a baffled puff of air. *Just trust me*. That would have been easier if he hadn't been lying, at least by omission, since he called. If he wanted their trust, that was going to take a while.

Richie snorted in the back of his throat; an incredulous noise full of frustration and no warmth whatsoever. "Yeah, that seems like a lot to ask right now," he sniped. "For all we know, he's gonna haul us off to the middle of the woods and light us all on fire," he said, taking one of the matchboxes from his pocket to lob it at Mike, who caught it effortlessly. "That's a tribal ritual, right?" he asked, turning back to the other Losers for support.

If they agreed with him, they certainly didn't say. All he did get was a slightly concerned "Beep beep, Richie," from Stan. He understood, he supposed, but the fact remained that, if they were going to keep playing this twisted horror movie game, they needed to lighten up about it.

The Losers followed Mike through town; past the Capitol Theatre, Dreamers Cafe, Keene's Drugs. If that hadn't helped jog their memories, Eddie doubted much else would. These streets had been their world before Derry became the suffocating presence it wound up being. How had they all forgotten it so easily? As they made their way out of the town's limits, they passed the Kissing Bridge and Richie, throwing caution to the wind, linked his hand with Eddie's and tugged him over toward the rail, letting his free hand trail over a certain weathered heart with two long since forgotten initials. He looked over at Eddie, who gave his hand a tight squeeze, before letting go. Eddie had to focus hard on what the immediate future held to banish the smile from curling the edges of his lips.

As the sky continued to lighten, they found themselves cutting through a field to the barrens. Bev stopped, struck by the memory of the promise and of... a kiss? She looked down at her hand and saw flashes of blood. Hurrying to catch up and snaked her arms around Bill and Stan's waists, pulling them as close to her as she could. It was weird, really. As much as she truly feared their task, she couldn't help but feel hopeful. They were together, the lucky seven.

Just as he was about to bitch about being, apparently, the only one of the seven of them whose body reacted the way forty-year-olds were supposed to react to being unceremoniously dragged from their beds on 4 hours sleep only to walk for miles and miles, Richie found himself suddenly distracted. The sun was out and strong as they came upon the entrance to the sewers. Eddie stopped cold and Richie caught up to him, snaking his arms around his waist and rested his head on Eddie's shoulder, whispered close, "We were idiots."

Missing what his partner saw, Eddie kept walking only to be tugged back. "What?" He asked, momentarily worried that he was going to end up on his ass in the nasty water until he was stopped steady on his feet.

"You made a comment about the greywater giving us a staph infection and I," Richie said, gesturing grandly to himself, "because thirteen and fuck you that's why," he said, smiling broadly, "turned to you with a huge stick-"

Eddie's eyes went wide, remembering the situation completely, down to finding Betty Ripsom's sneaker, and how Stan had been standing beside him then, grumbling about something. "And said 'I'll give you a staff infection,' which, you know..." he trailed off, finally locking eyes with him, "hot, Rich, that's the way to get your germaphobe crush to give you the attention you want," he laughed, and Richie did, too. He reached out and looped his thumb into his belt loop, giving him a couple of gentle shoves, "and started poking at me and flung something off the end of it at me. Oh my god. You were such a pain in the ass!" Eddie smiled fondly. It was a wonder any of their friends dealt with them. Richie raised his eyebrows instinctively, reaching out to grab and pinch. "Oh, fuck you," he laughed, tugging him forward. "Come on."

Before long, the seven grown-up Losers found themselves coming to a stop

Before long, they reached a densely wooded area. Eddie swallowed hard. Hard enough to choke down all of the factoids about diseases carried by bugs and decaying leaves and stagnant water that were trying desperately to have him make them known to the group. Soon, Mike began to fall back. As if acting on latent muscle memory, Bill carried on in front, but they all let their feet carry them until they reached a sun-streaked clearing.

"The barrens," Bev said, suddenly allowing her voice to carry through.

Ben's smile spread over his whole face. "This is where we came," he said, details coming to him in kaleidoscopic bursts, "after the rock fight."

"The day these bonds were forged," Mike nodded. He glanced around at his friends who seemed to be getting it. For what felt like the first time in days, he exhaled. It was really working. They were remembering.

Still, that's not to say that the whole group loved the concept. "The day these bonds were forged? What are you, a medieval knight?" Stan muttered under his breath to no one, really, despite Eddie's low laugh, and rolled his eyes.

Richie, however, moved forward, suddenly clear on why exactly they were here. "The clubhouse!"

Reaching out and taking his arm, Bev smiled over at Ben. "You built that for us!" She gave his arm a gentle squeeze that she tried to pass off as a shove. If any of the other Losers had seen it, they'd have possibly pointed out that the touch was too lingering to have been strictly friendly.

They might have done so, but then again, if they had, they'd have also likely commented on the way Eddie had subconsciously wrapped his arm around Richie's waist, giving Richie the opportunity in kind to drape his arm over Eddie's shoulder. "I remember that!" Eddie laughed, leaning his head against Richie instinctively, enjoying the warmth and closeness before realizing what he'd done and trying to delicately free himself.

It wasn't only his comedic timing that was well-honed. As though on cue, Richie stepped away to look for the location. "The hatch has to be around here somewhere," he stated, taking a couple of unsteady steps.

Ben was a few feet ahead of them by then. He was scratching his head, looking around at the foliage and bouncing on the balls of his feet, testing the ground. "I think the door was right-"

Indeed, it was.

Ben fell through the ground with a low 'oof.' There was a moment of tense silence as the Losers rushed to the edge of the hole to peer into the darkness, worried about their friend.

"Found it. I'm okay!" he called, scrambling to his feet. He leaned hard against the ladder to test its safety. It would have to do. "Come down." They obliged readily. Bev went first, taking Ben's outstretched hand, followed by Richie. Eddie wasn't far behind,

using Richie's shoulder as a makeshift handrail. Bill, then Mike, then Stan followed suit.

Despite the musty smell, it was the same as they'd left it, the same as it'd been when Ben presented it to them. He'd stood in the center of the space and beamed at his new friends.

Ever the one to engage mouth before brain, Richie had blurted out "What the dick is this?" Immediately regretting his tone, especially since Eddie had been lecturing about it and chastising how *isn't delivery an important part of comedy? And what about timing? Think before you speak, jerkoff.* Rephrasing, he looked around a little, adding "How'd you build it?"

Impressed, Bill added a quiet "When did you build it?"

Eddie, however, was decidedly unimpressed. After Ben had given an overview, the first of many construction pitches apparently, Eddie spiraled into panic mode. Rambling at length about building codes and safety and mold, his words sprayed out like machine gun shells. All Ben could do was blink helplessly at his friend.

From across the room, sharing a smoke and leaning against a beam, the pair watched the moment in silence. For her, it was different than Richie. She was curious. Interested. Ben was a puzzle to her. He wasn't like the others and she didn't feel the same way about him as she did about the rest. But the boy... He just couldn't help it. Since realizing he had a crush on Eddie months earlier, he'd been hopeless. He'd catch himself staring in all sorts of moments. But it was the ones like this he liked most. Moments where Eddie was demanding everyone's attention so he could moon and pine without raising so much as an eyebrow. By the time he'd started rounding on Stan and Mike was trying to mediate, Bill had joined them, reaching a hand up to rest against a high beam. His eyes flitted between Stan and Mike, grateful for some sane friends. Granted, he knew, he was to be blamed for some of their shared crazy. And he loved them for following him down the proverbial rabbit hole. Maybe that was why they had so readily followed Ben down that literal one.

Bev passed the cigarette back to Richie as Eddie continually batted the paddleball at Stan's face maniacally. "Can you maybe not?" he

asked, guarding his face against the attacks. The boys continued their bickering until the string snapped, sending the rubber ball careening under a floorboard.

"You broke his thing," Eddie said. Richie tried not to die. Suddenly, it all crashed down around him. Eddie and Stan were fighting. He took a long drag off the stale Marlboro and slumped against the post. This type of fight was *their* thing. He worried frantically over every recent fight. Did Eddie look as irritated as he had with Stan? Did his rebuttals to Richie's teasing come across so frenetically spiteful to everyone? He finally tuned back in as Eddie snapped out "I'm not putting my hand down there."

Stanley's silence that day worked wonders to quell Richie's momentary panic. If he liked Eddie the way that I do, he thought, that would have been the easiest joke in the world. Fuck, he could think of a dozen in varying degrees of perv.

"Hey, Stan," Eddie called, bringing them back into the moment. He'd reached under the floorboards and retrieved the 27-year-old rubber ball from beneath. "Power of the paddleball?" he asked, gently tossing it.

But Eddie's aim was still shit. What had been meant to be caught by his friend nearly hit him in the mouth. "Asshole," he said, finally catching it and rolling it between his fingers as it made its way down his chest. There was no bite to his word, though. As the clouds in Stan's eyes began to clear little by little, he was starting to remember just how much he loved them.

They dispersed, wandering around the cramped, damp space and began rifling through long-forgotten possessions. Old comics, use worn and heat warped cassette tapes, old movie posters, even the hammock remained exactly where they'd left them. As they found themselves immersed in summers past, a gruff voice came from a dark corner of the clubhouse. "Hey *Losers* ," it called out. Bill tumbled back over the milk crate stool and Mike stepped in front of him with a branch that had accompanied Ben on his fall through the hatch. Stan and Ben backed away slowly in opposite directions, each looking for something heavy. Ben remembered having a heavy, metal camp torch down there somewhere, and he could certainly make a

weapon out of that. Eddie and Bev stood stock still. The voice didn't sound right. He looked around panicked for Richie just as the voice added, "Time to float!"

His shoulders slumped as Richie came dashing out of the shadows. "Dude," he said, trying desperately to convey the level of not-fucking-cool that was.

Giggling through his words, he answered, "Remember he used to say that to us? And he'd do that little dance and..." he demonstrated, kicking his legs and swinging his arms while deedling out something that sounded like old-timey circus music. "Am I the only one who remembers this shit?" he asked, realizing that his friends didn't seem to be giving him any recognition at all.

Eddie furrowed his brows, shaking his head. "Are you gonna be like this the entire time we're home?" he asked.

"I'm just trying to add some levity to this shit. I'll just go fuck myself, then," Richie said, turning to thumb through the dampened stack of magazines they'd stashed away.

Bill, on the other hand, had already zeroed in on something. A coffee can stashed in an old crate-turned-shelf. Stan's always even lettering blocked out For Use Of Losers in red marker on yellowed masking tape. Remembering what was stored inside, Bill gave a soft smile. "Hey S-s-s-stan, catch."

This time, the toss landed, just as it had every time they'd played catch growing up. It had gotten to the point, then, where Bill and Stan weren't allowed to be on the same team if they ever decided to do anything athletic. They could, with the slightest flick of the eye, predict each other's moves. It was disheartening, really, when the rest of the Losers had the combined athletic ability of a two-by-four. Sure, Eddie was fast, Mike was strong, and Richie was strangely flexible for someone who was so lanky and awkward, but these weren't skills that were particularly valuable for a pickup baseball game in the park when none of them could get the ball to make contact with the bat on a cool summer night.

When Stan opened the coffee can, he found himself sucked back to

one such afternoon just before Bev left. He'd picked up the shower caps on his way to meet his friends at the clubhouse since Ben swore it was nearly finished. He was excited to have a place that was theirs, but between the poison ivy and the spiders... he shuddered to think. There wasn't a whole lot he could do about the poison ivy, but at least they'd be able to keep the spiders out of their hair. When he approached the counter with seven different caps, the clerk had eyed him suspiciously but decided it was better not to ask. He was grateful for that. How was he supposed to explain to a grown-up that he and his friends were going to hang out in a hole in the woods without ending up committed?

He handed one to each of the Losers with a bright smile after putting his on. Richie, however, had missed the memo. "What the fuck is this?" he asked when the vinyl bonnet landed in the middle of his chest.

"So you don't get spiders in your hair while you're down here," Stan offered.

Richie looked up at his friend from his position in the hammock. "Stanley, we're not afraid of spiders." He glanced behind Stan, only to find the rest of their friends all wearing theirs without so much as a peep of protest. "I stand corrected," he said, peering over his glasses at them before refocusing on the comic book that had caused him to ignore the conversation in the first place.

Bev snorted, flicking off the tip of the cigarette she'd had perched between her lips. "That's a first."

Considering it for a moment, he nodded, "Touché." The group settled into their own side conversations, save Ben who was shoring up a couple of the rafters. Before Richie knew it, his personal space had been encroached upon as Eddie flung himself into the hammock with him. Mike settled in to the swing across from them and chatted with them happily.

"Are they ever gonna figure their shit out?" Stan asked, perching himself on the overturned milk crate Bill had had his feet on. He pulled it away a little so he could look at both of them.

Bev laughed, sinking to the floor and pulling her knees to her chest. "What shit is that, Stan?" She glanced at him, before allowing her gaze to cross to the boys in question to linger on Ben.

He rolled his eyes, nudging her ankle with his toe to catch her attention back. "That they're in love," he said. It was the most obvious thing in the world. To him, at least. Everyone else, it seemed, had their own infatuations that they were preoccupied with.

Subconsciously, she recoiled. She took a deep drag off the butt of her smoke then put it out in the dirt. "You noticed that?" she asked, trying for nonchalant, but coming off more startled.

"I notice everything," he said casually. "Like the way you're staring at him," he kept his voice low and jerked his head toward Ben imperceptibly. Looking up at Bill, he sighed, realizing why he hadn't answered. "And the way you're staring at him," he said, backhanding Bill in the leg, not bothering to gesture at Mike. "You're all exhausting. You know that, right?"

"I'm not st-st-staring," Bill spluttered, cheeks turning a flushed shade of pink. It would have been adorable, Stan thought, if it wasn't so frustrating.

They were supposed to be *friends*. Even if they all decided to start going starry-eyed over each other, *friends* should have been able to talk to each other about their feelings, shouldn't they? *At least he was trying...* he just wished someone else would too, sometimes. After the longest contemplative silence, he gave up. "Okay, Bill. That's fine. You're not staring," he said and Bill nodded triumphantly, "just like Bev hasn't been daydreaming about Ben building her a dream house someplace far from Maine and Eddie didn't just climb into that hammock with Richie because he wants attention from him almost as much as he needs an excuse to touch him." He crossed his arms on his lap and looked at Bill for an argument that didn't come.

Sharing a look that seemed almost terrified of Stan's all-knowingness, Bev and Bill's mouths hung open wordlessly. Eventually, she managed a hushed "I just think it's cool that he did all this for us."

"Then, tell him that!" he whisper-yelled. "I love you all, but for crying out loud, you guys are the most emotionally constipated group of assholes to ever go through something traumatic together," he groaned, doubling over to rest his forehead on his arms.

Considering him for a moment, Bev stood, brushing the dirt from her coveralls, and crossed to Ben. She could tell him that she thought it was cool. That was simple enough. She was cool. Ben was cool. She could tell him he did something cool. It was cool. *If only she could come up with some other stupid words than cool..*

Apparently, his little outburst hadn't gone unnoticed by the rest either. From the other side of the clubhouse, Richie called out, "Stan, you should go to Florida with Mike. You're already like 80. You'd clean up with all the Grandmas." He made an exaggerated kissy noise. The other Losers laughed. Richie shot Stan a huge smile before pushing his glasses up on his nose and going back focusing on not focusing on Eddie by staring uselessly at the same panel of the comic he'd read five times since he climbed in with him.

Stan, however, didn't laugh. Instead, he grew solemn and turned to face Richie. That was what he'd been worried about a lot recently. "Do you really think we're gonna be friends when we're older?" he asked, suddenly dragging the mood down lower than the floor of the clubhouse.

"Of course," Mike said. It was reflexive. Even for as new as it all was, he couldn't imagine not being friends with them.

From where he and Bev were in the corner, Ben seemed shaken. "Why wouldn't we be?" Was that how it worked? It couldn't be. He couldn't go back to being alone again.

It wasn't meant to be accusatory. It was just something he'd been thinking about a lot lately. "Are any of your parents still friends with their friends from middle school?" His parents' friends were all through the synagogue. They hadn't known any of them even as long as Stan had been alive. It scared him.

The Losers shared a couple of troubled glances. If he hadn't tanked the whole tone of the afternoon, Stan would have almost found it

funny, the way it happened. Bev looked at the floor, but her body was still turned mostly to Ben, who stared at her with the same lovelorn gaze he always did. Mike and Bill shared a very long, wordless expression. Stan could almost hear them talking it over in their heads. It was *frustrating* , really. The one that should have amused him the most though, was Eddie scooting down into the hammock further and knocking Richie's glasses off his face with a socked foot before tapping him on the cheek with his big toe. If Richie's expression seemed irritated, it was only because he knew that he was too far gone to ever let go of Eddie. He'd just let himself get kicked in the face repeatedly and instead of doing anything to stop it, he just curled his hand around Eddie's knee gently.

Bill moved to the space next to his friend. "This is d-different, Stan." He meant that. His parents had old friends, mostly from college, but *they* hadn't had the types of experiences they had. They'd just killed a fucking sewer clown for christ's sake.

"Is it?" Stan asked, trying to keep his emotions even. "Things might be different then. *We* might be different," he said. He felt different already. Since their battle with Pennywise, something had been off. He couldn't sleep. He didn't like being alone, but he didn't like being with people either. His attitude had changed. His temper was gone. At his worst moments, he struggled to come up with a positive attribute for anything about himself, his friends or the world at large. It was all hopeless. It *was* different. It was *worse* .

"We'll always be f-f-friends. Nothing's gonna change that." He looked up at Bev, wordlessly acknowledging what none of them would say. She was leaving. They'd be testing this theory all too soon. "This d-d-doesn't go away when you get older," Bill added, partially to calm himself.

Leaning against the beam, Bev gave a watery smile. "Yeah, Stan, come on. You don't have to be so sad."

She couldn't dismiss the image of Stan, only a couple of years older, walking down to the quarry, hands shaking, and sticking a pistol in his mouth. He was sobbing. He was alone. She didn't know how she could tell, she just *could* . She'd left and everyone else would too. Everyone. Stanley would be alone in Derry and it would eat him alive

before he would graduate high school. It was one of the many sights that had been haunting her dreams since being caught in the Deadlights. It was the worst one, she thought. Worse than Eddie hanging himself. Worse than Mike getting hit by a car pulling a woman out of the way. Worse than Richie bleeding out in the bathtub, crying out Eddie's name. Worse than Ben jumping off of a building. Worse than Bill drinking himself to death. Definitely, she thought, worse than her own exit, battered and bruised, chasing it all away with a bottle of painkillers.

As the 27 years after the first battle with It crept on, the players in Bev's nightly dream theatre would become less and less familiar to her. Still, she'd be able to remember something to tell her who was in each place.

One particular summer night in 2004, everything shifted rapidly. The faces of the people she'd seen die over and over again for fifteen years all caught up to her. She could see the man with the dark curls and the wide face hang himself. The guy with the sad eyebrows and sculpted cheeks would go next, as always, but this time was the only time someone other than herself had the pills. Next would be the black guy with the kind smile and strong arms off the edge of a building. Then, the lanky dude with the glasses. He'd walk in on a dead body and immediately throw himself off the roof. After would go the handsome guy with the pretty eyes and the jaw and the abs. He'd clutch a scrap of paper to his chest and sob, waiting for the tears to fall. Finding none, he'd find catharsis another way. The next guy, with the prematurely grey hair and the crooked smile and the too-serious disposition, would hear a little kid calling for help and find himself in the middle of a staged attack. Then, she'd climb into bed and turn a pistol on herself. Unfortunately for Bev, the alarm clock on her nightstand showed the day, too. Less than 72 hours between the first death and hers.

When 72 hours became 73, then 74, then 75 and a trip to a local diner for coffee and hours 76, 77, and 78, Bev began to realize that, maybe, it had all changed. Hour 81. Maybe they'd rerouted history. Hour 84. When she fell asleep that night, watching seven people she couldn't help but care about, couldn't help but be irrationally attached to, commit suicide over and over had been a relief. It was

all different. They were all older. There was still time.

Over time, each vision had undergone different iterations. They'd all look pretty much the same, except one. The Hero's Death, originally belonging to Mike. It would turn out to be a pretty even split between Richie and Eddie on that one. Every time it would change, the person they were dying for was a blur and she could never figure out why. The one she'd had that night was different. She could see who it was Eddie was going to die for and, God it was so soon. He was even wearing the same clothes...

"I was right though," Stan said eventually, of his insistence that they wouldn't be friends when they got older. He sat down, holding the old coffee can between his knees. "I hate it, but I was right."

Eddie shook his head insistently, crouching down beside Stan. "No. Derry made us forget." He looked up at Richie quickly, grateful that it hadn't made them forget everything. "*It* made us forget," he clarified. He tried to sound sure of himself as he assured Stan. "We remember now and everything's back to the way it was."

"Is it?" he asked. His voice skewed higher, but he couldn't find it in himself to yell. Not like he wanted to, anyway. "When we leave here, are you all gonna stay in touch? Is Mr. Hot-Shot-Author gonna text his local historian buddy just to say hi?" He might not have been able to yell, but he could certainly get his frustration across without it. He turned from Bill to Bev and added, near growling. "How easy is it going to be to run your fashion line in New York and your Architectural company in Chicago and still pop in for drinks on a friday?" Finally, landing back on Eddie, he crossed his arms and looked him dead in the eye. "And when my son has his Bar Mitzvah next summer, are you two gonna fly to Georgia from L.A.?" He paused, letting the silence fill the void.

Eddie simply blinked at him in response before standing up and moving closer to Richie.

"Your son?" Bev asked quietly. She didn't know why she had expected differently. She didn't have kids, but her husband... well, her husband was bad enough. Suddenly, her mind flitted over the group. Who else stood so much to lose by coming back here?

He threw his hands up in defeat, as though reading Bev's mind. "See that, none of you even asked. I have a son *and a daughter*, " he said, reminding them that life had gone on. When the Losers exchanged worried glances, he simply nodded. "Yeah, exactly. It's not like we've settled into some easy groove. We're doing what we have to to survive and get back to our lives." He stood up and crossed to the stairs, meaning to head out into the sun. It was too dark down there anyway.

"Stan-" Ben started, a truncated plea to get him to stay; to listen.

He turned around and wrapped his arms around his middle. He didn't want to hear it, but he figured he had to. "No. Don't lie to me." Richie moved to his side and slung a long arm around his shoulders, giving him a squeeze and bringing him back to the group, tucking him between himself and Eddie.

Mike watched his friends sadly. He had hoped this would be easier. Especially now that he had Bill on his side. He had spent so much time fixated on defeating It, he'd never let himself think about what would happen if he couldn't get everyone else on board. "Nobody's lying Stan. There are things we don't remember yet, but we're getting there." That's why I brought you all out here." He took a deep breath, knowing he was getting to the part where they were all going to think he was nuts. Hell, he even thought he might have been nuts. But it was a chance. As far as he could tell, it was their only chance. "The ritual... it requires a sacrifice."

The thought of a cartoony spitfire sacrifice flashed through Richie's mind and he couldn't help his mouth. "Sacrifice? I nominate Eddie."

"Wait, what?" he whimpered, sticking his head around Stan to eye his boyfriend.

"You're little," he demonstrated innocently, pantomiming putting him in a box then putting him onto something. Even Stan cracked a smile. It was, he had to admit, familiar at least. After an awkward, enraged scoff from Eddie, he added flippantly, "You'll fit on a barbecue better."

Eddie sighed, moving over to the rest of the group, away from the

traitor he'd let sleep beside him every night. "I'm 5'9", asshole. That's perfectly average for most of the country, fuck you very much." He looked around at his absurdly tall friends, then settled on one, draping his arm around him. "Besides which, I'm fairly certain Bill's shorter than I am."

Eyes wide, the author squawked out an offended "Hey!" before looking over and realizing that, fuck, Eddie was taller than him. How did that happen?

Scrunching up his nose, Richie rolled his eyes at Bill. "Yeah, well, he's nowhere near as cute, cute, *cute* as you are," he said, crossing to them and pinching at Eddie's cheeks. Eddie moved backward trying to avoid the attacks but found himself tripping back into the hammock. The beam groaned a little but seemed to support it well, even still.

"Hey!" Bill pouted but found himself cut off. Mike gave him a brief smile, then let his eyes flit away.

Climbing into the suspended swing next to Eddie, Richie draped his legs over his lap, effectively trapping them. "Plus, I wouldn't have to listen to you bitch about my hygiene all the time," he said nonchalantly.

Glad for the contact, Eddie grabbed Richie's legs as they started to slide. The last thing they needed on this trip was a hospital visit. How was he supposed to explain that his forty-year-old partner slid out of a hammock they'd hung when they were thirteen and broke his hip. "You could also do a load of laundry once in a while, dirtbag," Eddie corrected, looking up at the other Losers for help.

Without so much as a thought, Richie snarked back. "Your mother never seemed to mind." The other Losers watched the scene carefully, fondly, and it was like they hadn't aged at all. How had Eddie not killed Richie at this point?

"Can you keep that shit out of your stream of consciousness for one fucking minute?" He snatched Richie's smeared glasses off his face and cleaned them on the microfiber lining of his jacket, but keeping them out of reach for longer than he needed to, adding a bemused

“Jesus...”

Richie genuinely laughed, for what he felt like was the first time in ages. “It’s cute that you think I’m Jesus when I’ve got your mother screaming ‘Oh God’ all night,” he cajoled, finally replacing his glasses on his face, realizing just how close to Eddie’s he’d wound up.

A finger raised in warning, Eddie groaned, “Say that again, fucknugget, and I swear-” Richie clamped down on the outstretched digit with his teeth.

“Beep beep, Richie,” Stan coached, overlapping Eddie and nodding at the rest of the group. Richie swallowed, remembering that that might not have bee

Bill started at the same time, looking at Mike for confirmation. “It’s n-n-n-not that kind of s-sacrifice.”

Mike folded his arms and nodded. He squared himself off a little, as though worried that their inevitable resistance would throw him off balance. “The past is buried, but you’re going to have to dig it up, piece by piece. These pieces, these artifacts, that’s why we’re here,” he said, like that explained anything. Artifacts, Eddie surmised, like the shower caps, that triggered memories of a significant event in their conquering their fears. “They are what you’ll sacrifice.”

What a load of bullshit, Richie thought. Trying to mask the sarcasm that felt so close to the surface, he slipped into a Yoda impression. “So, we start where do, oh enlightened one? Hrmmm.”

Exhaling sharply, Mike realized that he should have known better than to expect Richie to stay serious for more than a couple of minutes. That’ll be up to you. Your tokens are personal,” he said, looking around at the group. “I thought maybe someone might find something here, but then, we split up,” he said, tone of finality shaking the majority of the group.

“Woah, what?” Eddie spat, pushing Richie’s legs off of him and standing up.

Stan was with Eddie. He crossed his arms and moved beside his

friend. "Split up? Absolutely not," he argued.

Richie stood up too, standing behind Eddie. "No, that's the part in the horror movie where we all die." He shot Bill, who was awfully quiet, a pleading look but couldn't even catch his gaze which was narrowly focused on the floor. "I gotta be honest man, all due respect, this is fucking stupid." He looked over at Ben, who sat silently in the corner. "And why do we need tokens? We already remember everything. Saving Bev, defeating It," he exclaimed, looking at a petrified Bev. "I mean, we're caught up!" Richie's own voice scared him a little, but it was just too much. How could he possibly expect them to take any of this seriously? Even what he could remember of the couple of Bill's books he'd picked up in the past weren't that contrived.

"That's not everything," Mike countered. "We fought. But what happened after that? Before the house on Neibolt," he looked around at his friends, then added a calm, "Think."

"We c-c-c-can't remember, can we?" Bill asked, startled, looking over at Bev.

Taking a deep breath to calm himself, he started again. "There's more to our story. What happened that summer." Eddie rolled his eyes and turned away. Stan fought the urge to do the same, and instead, locked eyes with Ben. "Those blank spaces, like pages torn out of a book. That's what you need to find." He nodded a little, hoping that explanation would suffice, then he reiterated, "We need to split up. You each need to find your own artifact."

"Or," Stan piped up, supplying a much-needed alternative that *should* have been obvious, "you could just tell us what we're missing and not sound like some asshole who wants to help but is wasting our time."

Still facing the wall and cradling himself, Eddie stared at nothing. "After I broke my arm and my mother took me away," he said quietly. So quietly it was possible, for a moment, that they hadn't heard him. He turned to face them, moving as close to Richie as he dared. "You all fought." He swallowed thickly, looking at each Loser as he mentioned them. "Bill punched Richie. Stan, Mike, you left, out of self-preservation, I guess. Ben, you didn't want to be a part of

it. Bev and Bill moped.” He closed his eyes, remembering the black eye and the scrapes on Richie’s arm. He could still see the bittersweet smile on Stan’s face from the street as he’d watch Richie climb out of his bedroom window the next morning and the small wave. “Our group was fractured worse than my fucking arm for a couple of days before we went back to fight It.” Finally, he looked over at the dumbstruck man in front of him. “Am I close, Mikey?” he asked.

“How do you know-” Bev stammered, trailing off when she realized that she didn’t actually have a plan for where that sentence was going.

Throwing caution to the wind, Eddie grabbed hold of Richie’s sleeve, feeling the cold leather under his hand. “When we got back to the townhouse, Richie called me a loser and, instead,” he looked down at his arm, face a mask of mixed emotions, “I saw the word changed on a cast on my arm. Little bits came flooding back to me,” he said, finally chancing a sidelong look at Richie, who seemed concerned.

A small smile toyed at the corners of Mike’s mouth. “That’s good, I think,” he said, nodding at Eddie encouragingly. “So, you have some idea of where to start.” He stopped for a moment, adding, “Alone, that’s important.”

Stan covered his eyes, then pushed the curls off of his forehead, frustrated. “Yeah, no. Absolutely not,” he argued.

Stepping in front of Richie, Eddie tugged him closer. “Statistically speaking, if you look at survival scenarios, we’ll do better if we stay together,” he said, still clinging to Richie. He added his free hand around Stan’s shoulder.

“Splitting up is dumb, man,” Richie agreed, clinging to the two men near to him. “We gotta go together.” His voice was sad. He didn’t know what exactly he was so afraid of, but he didn’t want to do this alone. He wasn’t used to doing anything alone anymore.

Bill stood next to the steps shaking his head. “We weren’t together that wh-wh-whole summer,” he said, leaning against the wood for support.

"If you're going to remember everything, you need to retrace your steps," Mike said strongly, "alone. Meet me back at the library tonight when you've got your tokens."

The Losers climbed up the stairs and back up to the barrens. They considered each other quietly before beginning to head back out of the woods to seek their reminders. Most everyone else had headed back to significant places, leaving Richie, Stan, and Eddie still walking quietly past the townhouse, trying to figure out where to start.

"This is so stupid," Richie moaned, digging the toe of his shoe into the ground

From behind him, Stan and Eddie caught up quickly, each linking their arms through one of his. "Yeah, no, we're not splitting up," Eddie said, smiling up at him like they were getting away with something. Like, their first date, when he's been so proud of himself for lying to his mother, saying that he and Mike were going to the library to study for a history project when he was really meeting Richie at the Capitol to go see a movie.

Dumbfounded, Richie voiced a quiet "What?"

"We don't have to do it his way," Stan insisted.

Eddie took over the explanation. "We weren't together as a group that whole summer," he folded his hand around Richie's, intentionally toeing the line between *no one will suspect* and *this is not just friends*, "but we weren't alone either. You slept over at my house practically every night," Eddie supplied, looking Richie directly in the eye.

Tagging off of Eddie's reasoning, Stan added, "And you and I were together practically every day. We're going together."

When it seemed like Richie was going to argue, Eddie cut him off before he could even start. "I don't give a fuck what Mike says, Richie," Eddie assured, nodding before wrapping him in a tight hug.

Stan added his own grasp into the mix, clasping a hand tightly on his

friends' shoulders. "Come on, we'll take my car," he said, gesturing to the smart compact in front of the townhouse. They piled in and started driving the streets of Derry slowly, as though expecting something to jump out at them from every turn.

Smiling despite himself, Eddie buckled into the center of the back seat. They'd never gotten to have this type of day with Stan and, honestly, Eddie remembered being angry about it. He remembered the way it had taken them so long to adjust to the lack of Stan. It felt right that he'd just reinserted himself into their lives. Especially considering how they could have lost them. From the backseat, Eddie couldn't help but enjoy the view, even if it had taken Derry to give it to him.

This time, he had it back and he wasn't letting go. *No takebacks, motherfucker.*

Notes for the Chapter:

It's not a fix-it if Stan Uris is dead. Just saying. Besides, if you've already read *You'll Be Mine* and *I'll Be Yours*, you know he's alive... but Surprise?! Haha.

4. I Never Saw You Coming And I'll Never Be The Same

Summary for the Chapter:

Stan, Richie, and Eddie find their tokens.

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter is a big boi. Sorry about all of that. BUT, we're getting to the good stuff now. I just want to clarify, I'm not going to spend any time going over things that would have happened the same as movie! canon, hence why the Chinese food scene was so shortened. Ben and Bev and Bill's token journeys? All the same. This chapter is heavily centered on how Stan's presence changes things and what Richie and Eddie being together does to their journies.

As Stan drove slowly through the streets, the three men started spitballing ideas off of one another. At first, they were serious; the ice cream shop, Bill's house, the school. By the time Richie suggested the railroad bridge in Levant, they were into open territory. Eddie suggested they swim out to Islesboro. Stan almost won, though, suggesting they floor it for Sleepy Hollow and take their chances against the Headless Horseman. Eddie suggested a calm trip to Amityville because, clearly, their talents were being wasted on a do-over of Derry. Richie sounded back with Salem and asking some witches for help. They laughed and laughed, reveling in the ease of being together.

Eventually, though, they did get back on topic. "It's weird," Stan admitted, eyes fixed on the water tower, the only bit of Derry he had remembered, thanks to an old polaroid of himself flipping off the camera the weekend before he left. Eddie had intended to keep it, but Stan had actually really liked the shot and argued that it would, maybe help him remember to stay in touch. It didn't. But looking at it had always made something in his chest squeeze. "I'm getting memories back from later. Like high school, but nothing that'll help here," he admitted.

Then, they saw it. Beth Emeth Congregation. Stan hesitated at the corner, looking over his shoulder.

"Maybe we should go in, give it a look around?" Richie suggested.

Even though growing up in a split faith household didn't give Richie much faith in anything to speak of, when his mother had tried dragging him to synagogue with her, it had brought him one good thing: Stan. The rabbi's son was, in his opinion, the one good thing about going to services. When they were little, they used to run and play outside while their mothers talked about grown-up things. Stan's father was, to put it lightly, wary of Richie at first, but the longer the boy was around, the more he enjoyed Stan having a friend that encouraged him to be more adventurous. Not to mention that the boy was smart. Once, he'd walked in on the pair of them dissecting a passage from Deuteronomy with such vigor and allusions to their own favorite stories and lives at the ripe old age of ten. Rabbi Uris would never have admitted it, but he truly liked the more vivacious side of Stanley that Richie's presence elicited, and even respected the boy a little more for it.

Walking through the doors of the old brick building was like walking through a wormhole directly back to their youth. "It looks exactly the same," Stan marveled, trying desperately not to notice the way the eyes of each painting still felt like they were watching him, moving with him from row to row. "It even smells exactly the same," he said, taking a big whiff of spices and wood that wrung his empty stomach. "That's so fucking weird. I thought it smelled like that because of my old man. Must just be incense or something," he said, dismissing it.

The three walked into the old office space, Richie and Eddie a few steps behind Stan, looking for things that might be Stan's token. Opening an old dusty file cabinet, whose casters seemed to complain at the disruption of their decades-long slumber, he thumbed through folders by year. Spying the one marked 1989, he opened it up and fanned the papers out on the desk behind him. He saw his name on a post-it and froze. He didn't know what he had expected his token to be, but an essay was probably not high on his list.

On the second Tuesday of August, Stanley sat, head bowed as he

thought over what he wanted to say. "Shamar. That is a word that comes up a lot in today's readings," he started, writing quickly. He and the 3 other kids in his Hebrew school class all lamented the loss of another night of their dwindling summer on the way in, but something in the reading they'd been assigned seemed directed at Stanley. It may well *have* been. He knew his father did that sometimes. They were close, especially when compared to his friends and their fathers. Sometimes, though, when he found himself at a loss for how to broach certain topics, he'd lean into the Talmud. "Shamar. To watch, or observe." He gazed out the window to find Richie, laying on his back in the grass by their bikes waiting for Stan to finish. His legs were crossed, one foot tapping in the air to the rhythm of some song on his walkman. Stan gave a soft smile, then waved when Richie pointed his finger-guns at him. "I think that's fitting. I'm an observer. I watch the clouds. I watch birds. I watch people. Even my friends. I just watch. There are so many evils in this world, someone has to guard the flock." After everything they'd been through this summer, Stan had decided, after Bill punched Richie, that he didn't want to watch the Losers self-destruct. He wouldn't do it. Still, he couldn't bring himself to blame them. It was a lot. "In Bereishit, God instructs Abraham to keep his covenant and he shall be fruitful. I like that," he admitted to the paper, "I like the idea that, someday, the watching and guarding and keeping I've done will be worth something because right now, frankly," he sighed, looking up at his father. He decided, for the first time in his life, to be totally upfront about his feelings. That was part of being a man, wasn't it? Being honest, being true to yourself? He clenched his jaw and let his bold, neat lettering take over where he wanted his mouth to say, "it fucking sucks." He shrugged. His father would probably lecture him for that later, but it was true. "I watch and I see and I can't help it. I see how the adults in this town look at the kids. How they look at each other. So full of judgment and hatred. And I see how it affects the kids. It's infectious. It spreads from one person to another, from one neighbor to another, among friends, families. It's starting to reach my generation." He looked out the window at Richie again, completely lost to the world. Stan couldn't be sure, but from the thrashing of his head, it was almost impossible for him to be listening to anything but Smoke On The Water. Richard had the same reaction to that song every time he'd listened to it for as long as Stan had been aware of the song. A pair of older ladies walked by, whispering

behind their hands and shaking their heads as they looked at him. *He really doesn't give a shit, does he?* He thought to himself. *Or maybe he is as stupid as he looks...* he stopped short. Richie was not stupid. Stan would never, ever think that. For all the joking and the eye-rolling and sarcastic jabs aside, he knew better than anyone, save perhaps Eddie, how bright Richie really was. Just because he didn't always use the brain he had, just because he didn't always know when to say when just because his brain was running at 78 rpm when most everyone else was spinning 33's didn't mean that he was stupid. Sure, he did stupid things, but they were *twelve* for fuck's sake. Who doesn't do stupid things when they're twelve!? He continued on hurriedly. "As an observer, I'm granted the gift, I suppose, of seeing people for who they truly are and what they really do. And so often, it comes off as judgment. And I hate it. I hate that I look at my best friend, so full of joy and life and energy, and feel like I have to roll my eyes or make fun of him because, what, he cracked a joke? He doesn't take things seriously? We're 12. We've got years and years to take things seriously. And we look at the adults in our lives, we see what they've become and... We're scared." He thought back to the sewer and the house on Neibolt. And the fucking clown. He shuddered. "Fear is supposed to be good, I guess. It keeps us in line. Moshe says to fear HaShem and you'll need not fear any enemies. But my friends and I? We've seen things. Truly seen things that no one would believe in their wildest dreams. And they haunt us." There was no way they should have made it out of that house alive. Eddie nearly *hadn't*. Still, while they were riding their bikes together that afternoon, Stan could tell something had been eating Richie. He'd had another nightmare and woke up to Eddie, watching him with a look of terrified concern, and it broke his heart, but something had occurred to him- they had to go back. Stan had nearly upended his bike when he said it, but the more he talked it over, the more it all made sense. They had to finish it off. If they didn't, It was going to tear them apart. "I'm tired of watching as my friends fall apart at the seams. I'm tired of watching as they work themselves sick trying to be everything that their parents want them to be." He thought of Eddie, locked away in his proverbial tower, worrying away over something Gretta Keene had said to him about his medicine being bullshit. When Richie had suggested, after his first idea of choking the butch to death with her own chewing gum for scaring Eddie like that didn't land, that they go hide out in the

library and look into fake medicines and stuff so they could photocopy what they found and he could take it back to Eddie that night, Stan had been all for it. Spending a summer day in the library wasn't something he'd expect from Richie, but that boy would do anything if it made Eddie happy. Sometimes Stan wondered if there wasn't something going on there, like what Bill had confided in him from the day they met Mike. Honestly, he sort of hoped there was. "I'm tired of watching as they try to right all the wrongs of the world. It's not our job," he wrote, hand cramping under the pressure of his rapid scrawl. "It's yours." He underlined it three times, then added an asterisk, annotating that he meant *yours as in the adults of Derry, not yours as in you specifically, Dad* . "You've made this mess. I don't want to watch as we have to clean it up." He took a deep breath and made a promise to himself, writing it out before HaShem himself. "So, I'm going to go forward and live. Give someone else something to observe for a change." That didn't feel good enough. Even though he knew, academically, that it was finished, he still needed the literary equivalent of banging his fist on the table. "See me, and consider this the end of my watch," he wrote, closing off the sentence with a flourish. With that, he was off. He dropped his paper on his father's desk with a nod and a *see you at home, Richie and I are going out for pizza*, he was gone, pulling his friend from the ground with an outstretched hand.

As he read and reread the words, he sank into the desk chair. His eyes lingered on an annotation from his father, "Stan- well said young man. Remember, the world's grief is not on your shoulders alone. Do what you can. When you read this, we should talk about what, perhaps, we can do for a certain bespectacled member of your flock. I worry about him, son."

Sitting there, he covered his face and let loose a few tears. He missed his father so terribly sometimes he could hardly breathe, could hardly think. Before he could let himself too far into his own head, the reality of a forty-year-old man crying over his father who'd been gone almost 12 years too much for his mind to handle, he felt a strong hand on his back.

"Thanks for showing up, Stan," Richie said quietly, standing beside him.

Sitting cross-legged on the ground, Eddie swiveled the chair to face him. "You know we'd both come for your son's Bar Mitzvah, right?" he asked. "When this whole thing is over, your kids have two new uncles to deal with."

Richie reached out and ruffled Stan's soft curls, "I'm not planning on forgetting you again. You're stuck with us, Stanny Oakley."

He snorted a teary laugh. "I know that. I just-" he covered his face in his hands again. "I'm starting to feel a little clearer now, and... this is all really shitty," he said finally, resigning to the reality of it all. The more the drugs wore off, the more he came to realize just what a shitshow they were in for. They weren't kids anymore and fighting this clown... This was supposed to be over. They were supposed to have defeated It. He wasn't supposed to have to do this again.

"Yeah, yeah it is," Eddie agreed, patting him on the leg.

Mulling it over and over in his head, Stan couldn't figure out for the life of him- why them? Why did it have to be them? "Why is this the life that we're stuck with?" he asked.

Richie shrugged, gaze focused intently on Eddie. "It's a pretty good one, honestly," he stated. A really fucking great one, actually. If you could set aside this temporary roadblock, their lives were about as on track as he could have ever hoped. Well, a little behind in some areas, sure, but a lot of that came down to government restriction but hey.

Stan scoffed. "Yeah, a good one that I was ready to give up at the slightest suggestion of coming back here." He shook his head, imagining Patty trying to raise the kids on her own. Of course, she could *handle* it. Patty was a rockstar when it came to parenting. Patty was a rockstar when it came to a lot of things. Everything, really. And he'd been so sure that taking himself off the board was the only way to do this.

"Why?" Eddie asked, earning himself a light kick to the leg from Richie. He still had to ask, though. Stan didn't have to answer, but Eddie at least had to try.

"Because I'm the weakest one of us all." His response was simple and, when he realized it wasn't enough, he put a hand up to stop their protests. "I've never aspired for greatness like you or Bill," he said to Richie, who'd always known he was going to be a star. "I've never been particularly good at anything that people are proud of, like Bev or Ben. I'm not a fighter, like you," he said, turning to Eddie, who blushed a little, not seeing where that was true in the slightest. "I'm not determined, like Mike. I'm observant. That's it. I work a boring 9 to 5 office job, have a wife, and two kids. I've become a white picket fence dad and that's okay with me. That's..." he smiled a little, unable to look back at either of the men watching him intently. He shrugged. "That's what my life looked like and that was fine. Perfect, even. Normal. Serene." His voice turned darker. "But I'd rather have died in my bathtub at my own hands than have had to come back here and die however Pennywise sees fit." He hid his face in his hands, digging his elbows into his thighs harshly. It was mortifying really, how quickly he'd really, decided to throw it all aside.

Richie crouched between the two men and did his best to force Stan to look at him, clumsily clubbing his hands out of the way of his face and putting a hand on his neck so he had very little choice in the matter. "That's not weak, Stan," he assured, "Grabbing your own life by the balls and saying *fuck this, I'll take my chances with the great unknown?* That's..." he struggled to come up with words that didn't make it sound like it would have been even *remotely okay* if Stan had died, but the point he was trying to make was that it wasn't weak. Eventually, he gave up the struggle for the best word and settled on the right one. "That's strong. You decided to be in total control of yourself and your life. There's no shame in that, especially knowing what we're up against."

Stan hung his head. "It doesn't feel like it," He admitted, voice sad.

Standing up and tugging Stan out of the chair, he said, "Come here. I'm gonna hug you and you're gonna have to deal with that, okay?" He wrapped his friend in his arms and roughed up the back of his head. Just 48 hours before he couldn't remember his name. Less than 24, he was sure he was dead. And now he was there with them and breathing and gonna help them kick some demon clown ass. "While we're being all open and honest here, I'm so fucking glad you're

okay, man,” he said, voice *definitely not* bordering on breaking with emotion.

Moving closer to them, Eddie squeezed in under their arms. “Yeah, you scared the shit out of us, dude,” he agreed, taking a fistful of the back of Stan’s sweater as leverage.

“Sorry,” he said quietly.

Richie shook his head. “Don’t be. But don’t do it again, either,” he said, leaning back to look him in the eye. “Stanwich the Manwich belongs right here with us.”

“What did I do to deserve this?” he asked, eyes pointed up at the ceiling dramatically.

“Prick,” Eddie laughed.

As they broke apart and started heading out of the office, Richie piped up, “Can I ask you one more thing, though?”

One eyebrow quirked as he watched him out of the corner of his vision, Stan asked, “Is it a serious question or a Trashmouth question?”

Impressed, Richie laughed a little. “A serious one, believe it or not,” he answered.

“Go ahead, then.”

The three men took a couple of steps in silence as Richie tried to figure out how to phrase his question so it didn’t sound as stupid as he felt. He tugged at Stan’s sleeve lightly, stopping them, then turned him to face him. “How are you here?” he settled on eventually, looking at the man like he still didn’t quite believe it.

After a moment’s hesitation, trying to figure out the best way to either avoid the question or answer it the wrong way, he decided to just be honest. He turned his arm over, looking at the gauze peeking out below the cuff. “I missed the v-”

“No, I mean, like...” Richie interrupted. He didn’t mean medically.

He got that part. What he meant was how was he not strapped to a bed in Georgia. "Don't they put you on a 72 hour hold? How are you here and not still in a hospital?" he asked.

Stan's eyes went a little wide. *That* . "Oh. Uh. We should probably avoid cops and stuff for a while," he said casually, starting to walk toward the door.

"What?" Eddie yelled.

With all the same amount of distress he'd reserve for telling Patty he hadn't taken the trash out, he elaborated, "I broke out, Eddie."

Eddie seemed to vibrate with the new information, a thousand ways that could go wrong floating in his head. Even Richie was taken aback. "Jesus, Stan," he hissed.

"What? Were you expecting some sort of magic explanation?" Stan answered shortly as he started to usher the men back out through the doors and onto the street. "Or that I told the doctor, look, I know I just tried to kill myself, but it was because I actually didn't want to go back to the town where I grew up and fight a clown who eats kids with my best friends from childhood for the second time so I appreciate the concern, but if I'm gonna be alive, unfortunately, my friends need me so, I'll just be going now? How do you think that would have worked out in a mental ward?" He snapped, unaware of the fact that he'd said all of that both incredibly loud and at such a rapid-fire pace that passersby began to stare.

Richie threw his hands up in surrender as Eddie ushered Stan off to the side. "I just..."

Cutting him off and waving off his oncoming concerns, he simply said, "Shit happens. I'll sort that out when we kill It, okay?"

Eyebrows furrowed together, Eddie's demeanor softened. He folded his arms over his chest and looked at his friend. "What about your wife and your kids?" he asked. If he looked worried, then his emotions were doing their job. He *was* worried. He knew that Stan was a grown man, but this was a big deal, and he couldn't help his defeatist attitude in times like these. He was seeing images of cop

cars and Stan being dragged away from them in handcuffs, taken to the nearest hospital and locked up indefinitely.

There was no real concern, however. Stan had made pretty sure of that. "Patty knows," he said, rolling his eyes.

Richie gaped at him. "She what?"

"Patty knows," Stan repeated. "I stopped by the house after because I needed clothes and told her everything. She knows when I'm lying. She knows that I'm not a man who would do something like what I did without reason. I don't know how much of it she really, honestly, believes, but she knows," he said.

Eddie was impressed. Of the married Losers, they all should have known that Stan would have been the one with the well-adjusted, open partnership. Still, he found it hard to believe that anyone who hadn't lived what they had could ever accept even part of it as truth. Either way, it was more than he had imagined. "Okay, I'm hugging you again because..." he struggled to come up with a well-defined reason before he flung his arms around his friend's neck. "Holy shit, Stan," he whispered.

The men hugged for longer than was strictly necessary, except that, for all concerned parties, it *was* necessary. It wasn't fair that such important parts of their lives had been hidden from them. It wasn't fair that, because of that, they didn't get the chance to be the friends they should have been, to know the things they should have known.

When they finally separated and made their way to the car, Stan gave a tearful sniff and turned to Richie and Eddie. "Alright, already. Who's having their midlife crisis next?" he asked.

Five minutes later, as they were standing outside the old arcade it became evident that that would be Richie. When they finally managed to get the door open, he stood stock still in the doorway, as frozen in place as the arcade was frozen in time. The machines were dusty and graffitied, the movie posters were torn, but it was all the same. Hell, even the old popcorn cart in the corner still held popcorn in it. Richie took one step forward, into crunching glass, then turned right back around and stood on the street. He tried to calm himself

down to make a go of it again. "Oh, shit. Okay," he took a deep breath as soon as he felt the familiar pressure of Eddie's grip on his arm. Then, he panicked again. *Eddie* . Eddie couldn't be here. It would take one look at the scene playing out and know. It would use him. It would hurt him. It would take him. He shrugged him off and shook out his limbs, jumping nervously from one foot to the other. "It's fine. Guys, I think..." He trailed off, glancing over at Stan for a moment, then Eddie. "Uh, I think I might actually want to do this alone."

"Okay, whatever you think," Stan acquiesced, stepping to the side. "We'll be right here if you need us."

At the same time, Eddie stepped in front of him, grabbing his arms again. "Fuck that, dude. We stick together." He locked eyes with Richie, uncaring of who saw, and gently ran his fingers up through Richie's hair before lingering on his jaw. Such a simple motion and he could already see that Richie was calming. "I will not have you playing the part of the big-breasted sorority girl running upstairs when you should be running out the front door," he joked. When Richie seemed to want to interject, Eddie cut him off. He linked their arms together, a tone of finality to his movements. "No, I'm coming with you. You coming, Stan?" he called over his shoulder as he dragged Richie onward.

Stan watched them together for the scarcest moment, then replied "Yeah, I guess.

The three paced the space. Eddie, careful not to touch anything dusty or dirty, shoved his hands in his pocket and stared up at the movie posters. Most of them were for movies from the late 90s and things that he and Richie wouldn't have seen together there, but he couldn't help but let his mind wander back to their first real, actual date.

One night, about two months after they'd admitted their feelings to one another, Richie sat up stark straight from where he'd been lying on Eddie's bed reading through the funny pages, his head on his boyfriend's chest as Eddie carded his fingers through his hair. "Shit," he hissed, turning to look at him.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, furrowing his brows and propping up on his elbows to make up for the sudden change in angles. “You okay?”

Richie shook his head, turning to face Eddie seriously and casting the paper aside with a swish. “No, I’m the worst,” he said, worrying his fingers together.

Giving in and sitting up, Eddie assured him, “No, you’re not. What happened?”

“I have a boyfriend.” Eddie’s world stopped for a moment as his mind filled in all the ways Richie was about to break his heart. “I have a boyfriend and we’ve been together for months and I’ve never,” he moved closer, taking Eddie’s worried face in his hands, “never taken him on a date.”

Relaxing, realizing that nothing was actually wrong and he was the boyfriend in question, Eddie sighed. “Richie...”

Still, he wasn’t having it. “I mean it, babe. I’m a horrible boyfriend,” he said, kissing Eddie so tenderly that Eddie could feel the warmth of it coursing through his whole body. “We’re dating, but we’ve never been on a date. How have you not pushed me out of your window?”

Eddie regarded his panic fondly. “I wonder the same thing sometimes,” he admitted, scooting closer and arching his legs over Richie’s. “But it’s not like we can exactly do the hand holding, kissing in public, couple thing if we’re trying to keep it a secret, right?” Richie gave a noncommittal shrug. “Unless we’re good to start telling people?” he suggested, knowing the answer was a resounding-

“No, no, I don’t mean that,” Richie spluttered. He wasn’t ready for *that*. Not in Derry. Not when the guys Bowers used to hang around with were still terrorizing the neighborhood, and not in a fun Thriller-esque way. “I just mean... There’s gotta be something that we can do, someplace we can go where it won’t be an issue.”

Pausing to think it over, Eddie gave a half-smile. “Movie?”

Richie thumped the side of his head exaggeratedly. "Movie!" He retrieved the paper from where it had fallen to the ground and they started looking at the next day's listings. Eddie trailed his fingers gently over the small of Richie's back as they lay together, eventually deciding on the one with Dan Aykroyd and the kid from Home Alone. They'd seen the trailer the last time they went to a movie with Mike and Eddie remembered that it looked cute. A movie about first love for their first real date. What could be more perfect?

3:30 on a Tuesday was not *exactly* the prime movie-going time, which made it perfect for them. Eddie had lied to his mother, telling her he was going to study with Mike and would be eating dinner at his place. Strangely enough, if Sonia Kaspbrack had her druthers, she'd rather Eddie spend time with Mike than Richie. The boy was quiet and respectful and seemed to always be willing to help when needed, so she obliged much more readily. The boys climbed the steps to the back row and sank into the darkness. The only other patron was a little old woman in the second row, so they knew, as long as they weren't too loud, they could be as together as they wanted. Richie folded the armrest between them up and pulled Eddie in under his arm.

After years of movie watching with Eddie in any number of venues, Richie knew better than anyone not to interrupt if Eddie was interested in the movie. He would get this cute, cute, *cute* crease in his brow if he was following intently. Like then.

"There's Vada and her boooyfriend," teased one of the girls on screen.

"He is not my boyfriend!" the protagonist snipped back.

Richie looked down at Eddie in his arms. Oh, he knew *that* argument well enough. *Give it a couple years, chickee. He will be. Give yourselves time.*

The girls continued to chastise them from the curb. "I bet she kissed him on the lips!"

Jerking a thumb to her friend, she countered with "Do you think I kissed that ugly old thing?"

“Yeah!” the little boy added, jumping in at his friend’s side before catching the insult. “Hey...” he added, a little mokey.

Richie trailed his right arm down Eddie’s to lace their fingers together. The hand Eddie had rested casually on Richie’s inner thigh squeezed a little to get his attention as he leaned up to kiss his boyfriend. The movie went on and the girl explained to the chick from Halloween that she didn’t really care what the annoying little girls said.

“I only surround myself with people I find intellectually stimulating,” she assured, and the boy smiled widely, proud to fall into that category.

Eddie laughed. He knew that face. Richie made that face all the time when they were younger. He probably did, too. He leaned up to kiss Richie once more, longer this time.

That was more what Richie had in mind when he said movie date anyway. Making out in the back row is what movies were for. Okay, maybe not for, but that’s why you went on dates to the movies, wasn’t it? He wasn’t going to let the opportunity pass. He tightened his grip on Eddie and pulled him close, into his lap. Eddie trailed his hand up and down Richie’s ribs and smiled softly into the kiss.

The movie caught their attention back a little while later. The girl had pricked her finger and suggested, “Hey, we can become blood brothers.” The little boy protested, reminding Richie so much of Eddie when they were younger it was almost painful. When she finally managed to talk him into picking the scab off a mosquito bite, he hissed in pain. “Okay, rub them together. Now, we’re blood brothers for life,” she said. Richie reached for Eddie’s left hand with his own, kissing the scar on his palm gently. Instinctively, Eddie brushed at Richie’s jaw in response, turning his head to face him. He nipped lightly at Richie’s bottom lip, pulling him flush against him as he did.

A while later, the girl appeared at the boy’s front porch, trying to get his attention and draw him outside. “What do you want? My mom will skin me alive if she finds out I’m out here,” he hissed.

"Let's go to the church," the girl answered, as casually as though it was expected that he would go along. Eddie smiled. He knew how *that* went. He'd already been losing that argument for ten years. *Keep pushing him. Some of us need the nudge.* "They're playing bingo tonight."

"I told you, I'll get in trouble!" the boy answered.

"Pacifist."

"I am not!"

"Bed wetter."

"I stopped that!

The boys laughed as the kids on screen bickered the whole way to the church and through the bingo tournament. Richie pinched lightly at Eddie's arm, needling him playfully. With a swat, he was discouraged easily enough and Eddie rested his head against Richie's chest comfortably, wondering if they'd been that obvious. They had been, Eddie knew, but still, no one had said anything. If Stan had stayed, Eddie was sure they wouldn't have been able to keep their secret much longer. He'd have taken one look at them in that first week and known.

After a while, the main character said sadly, "I'm running away." She pushed her bike to a rolling start and hopped on.

The boy followed behind, pedaling his slowly. "Where you running to?"

The girl rolled her head to the side and shrugged. "California. I'm gonna live with the Brady Bunch." Eddie laughed, looking up at Richie. *But that's far.* Somewhere in a distant part of his memory, he heard himself and Richie. *Will you be back in time for school tomorrow? That's the point, Spaghetti Head! I'm running away.*

"I wanna live with them, too," the boy piped up, hurrying to catch up with his friend.

"No, you can't," the girl dismissed quickly. *Alone? Alone.* "They

already have enough kids. You'll have to live with the Partridge family."

The little boy looked crestfallen. "Really?" *That sounds scary. D'you want me to come with you?*

Richie was starting to get a little restless. When he'd signed on for a movie with an SNL alum, he'd expected comedy, at least a little. Truthfully, he was beginning to feel a little lied to. This wasn't Stantz or Beldar. It certainly wasn't Elwood. Still, once the main character and her best friend kissed under the weeping willow tree, he was back in it. It was short and sweet. Not entirely unlike theirs, all those years ago on the playground. Sure, they were supposed to have been Han and Leia, and sure Bill and Stan were there, but there was no denying that Richie had pestered extra hard on his own behalf. "You better not tell anyone," the girl said as they walked home.

"You better not either," the boy answered quickly.

"Well, let's spit on it," she said.

He gave in quickly. Eddie laughed warmly and leaned into Richie, snuggling against him and enjoying the normalcy of their afternoon. It was normal for them, he supposed, because somehow Eddie being Richie's boyfriend wasn't a whole lot different than Eddie being Richie's best friend. It was even, he hated to admit, almost easier. He still got the knotted up feeling in the pit of his stomach, but it wasn't a secret. He could lean over and kiss him or grab his hand or sit in his lap any time he wanted. He didn't have to worry about Richie finding out and bailing. Richie was just as enamored with Eddie as he was.

Before the on-screen pair went their separate ways, he called out her name. When she turned back, he asked, "Would you think of me?"

"For what?" she asked.

"Well, if you don't get to marry Mr. Bixler," he answered, knowing the girl's crush on their English teacher. Richie smiled and leaned down, pressing a kiss to the top of Eddie's head.

"I guess," she answered. Eddie let his hand drop back to trace light lines up Richie's thigh. He was glad they'd picked such a cute movie.

Quickly, though, the movie wasn't cute anymore.

A cop was at the door of the funeral parlor the family lived in and operated. Dan Aykroyd was climbing the stairs to his daughter's room. Richie could feel a knot in the pit of his stomach. The sad music, the dimmed lighting? He pulled Eddie close to him and rested his cheek against the top of his head.

"I told him not to tease those bees. Did he get stung?" the girl asked. Her father didn't reply. "Maybe I should go over and yell at him," she said, moving to get out of her bed.

A father's hand reached out to comfort a confused daughter. "No, sweetheart, you can't," he said, trying to wordlessly explain.

Richie closed his eyes and heard Eddie release a small gasp. "Why not?" the girl asked, prompting the answer neither of the viewers wanted to hear.

"He was allergic to bees," the dad answered. *And chocolate. And cashews. And cats. And ragweed. And soy. And Penicillin.* The mental list in Richie's mind started to roll and he shook it away. It was just a movie. *Just a movie.* The little boy wasn't Eddie, despite the slight similarities and his own panic.

The little girl's brow furrowed. "He's okay, isn't he?"

Eddie pressed his face into Richie's chest. He couldn't watch. "There were just too many of them." *Eddie was nearly killed.* In the back of his mind, Richie was sucked back to the summer of 1989, the rotten, crumbling floorboards of that fucking house on Neibolt street beneath him, trying his best to get Eddie out. If he couldn't get him out, he was going down fighting because if Eddie wasn't leaving that house alive, neither was Richie. He'd begged for Eddie to look at him because he couldn't imagine the last thing Eddie saw being Pennywise. He wouldn't let that happen. Fighting with Bill on the street that day felt like the one thing that had to happen. It had to.

He was so scared and he couldn't take it out on the clown. Bill was the next best thing. Bill had dragged them down there. They were all there for him. He couldn't imagine what he would have done if Eddie had died that day. He didn't want to think about it. Instead, he dug his fingertips into Eddie's shirt, pulling him as tightly to him as he could manage.

They were both too wrapped up in the movie now to go back to ignoring it. Eddie's tears left wet marks on Richie's shirt where his cheek was pressed do his chest. Richie had kicked up the armrest on Eddie's other side so they could lay like they were on one of their couches. As the little boy's funeral came around, Richie shifted, looking for the little girl. When she slowly started to make her way down the stairs to the parlor, Eddie whimpered.

"Wanna go tree climbing, Thomas J?" she asked, nearly climbing into the coffin with her best friend. "His face hurts! And where are his glasses? Put his glasses on!" She dissolved into sobs, leaving both of the young men in hysterics. Richie laced his hands into the back of Eddie's shirt and tried not to insert himself into the movie. "He can't see without his glasses." Eddie, on the other hand, was succinctly wrecked. He hadn't quite had the immediate fear of Richie's death put into his head, but he still knew just how close they'd come to this being one of them, what felt like a lifetime ago.

The movie's pace seemed to signal the pending end. "I should have told Thomas J he was my best friend," the little girl admitted to her soon-to-be stepmom.

"I'm sure he knew," she said, brushing her hair before bed.

Eddie scooted up and pressed a gentle kiss to Richie's lips. "I love you," he said quietly. "You're my best friend. You know that, right?"

The corners of Richie's eyes crinkled a bit. His mouth turned up into a soft smile. "I love you too, babe," he said, thumbing Eddie's jaw lightly before bringing him back in for another kiss.

When the credits rolled and the boys had dried their eyes well enough to reintroduce themselves to the world, Richie kissed Eddie one more time for good measure, pulling him up out of the seat and

they headed down the street to Dreamers Cafe to sublimate their sadness with comfort food. “What the fuck was that movie?” Richie asked, swiping a fry into his chocolate malted.

“Depressing,” Eddie said, avoiding Richie’s gaze by analyzing the swirl of the sesame seeds on his hamburger bun. “I mean, why can’t movies just be happy. Real-life is grim enough.”

Richie nodded. “That’s for sure,” he said, stealing an onion ring from Eddie’s plate and replacing it with a handful of fries. “Although I have to admit, it’s not so bad right now.” He dragged his foot slowly up and down the inside of Eddie’s leg.

Relaxing into the surreptitious touch, Eddie smiled. “Yeah, it’s alright I guess,” he said, playing coy with a roll of his eyes. “I mean, company sucks, but...”

“If that’s what you’re after...” Richie said, quirked his eyebrow up over the rim of his glasses.

Eddie nearly choked on the carbonation of his float. “I meant-” His cheeks tinged a delightful shade of red and Richie laughed. “I didn’t mean-” Even from across the booth, Richie could see the way Eddie’s heart was hammering in his chest. It was adorable, and a stark contrast to the heaviness they’d both been feeling earlier. “Dammit, Richie, you know what I meant!”

Instead of driving, because God forbid Mrs. K were to realize that Eddie had lied about where he was going, the boys walked home. The streets were dark. The November chill grew worse with each passing moment. Richie snaked off his beat-up sherpa lined corduroy jacket and draped it around Eddie’s shoulders, making the connection for the first time why he wore so many layers- so he’d always have one for Eddie. He buttoned up his flannel and snagged Eddie’s outstretched hand. Yep, that’s how this was supposed to feel.

Still, Eddie couldn’t help but notice that something seemed off with Richie. “You okay, Rich?” he asked. He was really starting to have to crane to look at him when they stood next to each other.

“Me?” Richie asked innocently. “Peachy keen, jelly bean.”

Hesitantly, hearing the deflection coming a mile away, he asked, "You sure? You're quiet."

With a sigh, Richie admitted, "Just that fucking movie. It's got me a little rattled. I mean, I just..." he pushed his free hand through his hair, then adjusted his glasses, "it was a lot, you know." Eddie was watching him carefully and, once the telltale fidgeting started, he tugged his boyfriend out of the street and into one of Derry's many deserted back streets. Richie resisted, stomping his feet a little at the detour. "I don't even want to say it because it sounds dumb. And morbid. And fuck, I don't know." The boys stood squarely in front of each other, hand in hand. "This is our first real date and we spent like half of it sobbing," he said, rolling his eyes. This was definitely *not* how this was supposed to go.

"Yeah. But, Rich, we both could have died when we were twelve," Eddie said. He had a point. "Not for nothing, sweetheart, but I think that movie was allowed to knock the wind out of us." He swung their joined hands between them lightly, rocking on the balls of his feet.

"I could have lost you before I even had you," Richie said, pulling him closer than he'd dared since they were in the relative privacy of the darkened movie theatre. He fanned his fingers through the hair above Eddie's ear, then brought his hand to rest on his boyfriend's neck.

A cheeky grin crossed Eddie's mouth. "You're stuck with me, now," he said, leaning up to kiss him briefly. He almost didn't even stop to see if anyone saw. Almost.

Stuck. *Ha*. Like Richie could ever feel stuck with Eddie. That was never even a possibility. "I know it's early for us, but do you honestly mean that?" he asked. It had only been two months. He knew that. They were sixteen. He knew that, too. But he also knew, pathetic and irrational though it may have been, that there was no version of his life that he could see that didn't have Eddie in it.

It was Eddie's turn to give an exaggerated sigh then. "Richie, do you want to know when I realized that I love you?" Richie nodded, especially since it was something he'd been wondering since Eddie

sort of sprung that confession on him, dancing in the rain in the glow of his car headlights. "A couple of weeks before Georgie went missing..." Richie frowned a little, but Eddie continued. "Do you remember climbing into my room for about a solid week? Your dad had gotten really rough and said some things that you still have never told me?"

"Yeah?" he said. It felt like forever ago, but yes, he remembered. And he still had no intention of ever repeating the vile, loathsome things his father had said.

Eddie smiled, remembering the way all he wanted to do was make Richie happy. Not in a weird, *I want to fix you* sort of way, but in a *you're hurting so I'm hurting* kind of way. "That was the first time I knew for sure."

"I've got you beat, babe," Richie said smugly, licking his lips a little, making Eddie suddenly very desperate to get in off the streets so that he could kiss him properly.

"I wasn't aware it was a contest?" Eddie said skeptically, even though just about everything was a contest with Richie.

"Isn't everything?" he snarked. Eddie rolled his eyes at the voice inside of his head.

Laughing at his boyfriend, he tucked in closer, wrapping Richie's icy hands in his and pulling them up into the sleeves of his jacket. "In your mind, I guess," he groaned, before adding, "Go ahead. Lay it on me."

"*Christmas before.*" Eddie stared up at his boyfriend's bright eyes and nodded impressed at Richie's admission. "Remember when we had that movie night at my house and you and I fought because dear old Maggie and Wentworth skipped town for a couple of weeks and left practically no food in the house, but we still fell asleep on the couch together?"

"The night you said 'you're not my husband' even though you still to this day consider the play wedding from when we were ten legally binding?" he asked.

“Yeah. That night,” he said, nodding firmly. “After you apologized, and we were laying there all quiet, I went back to all of the thoughts that had been zipping around in there all night and pinpointed the butterflies and the touching and the staring and it all just clicked,” he said.

Eddie thought it over for a moment. “So, does that count as our first fight?” he asked, not really sure what he meant by that, but he was more than happy with Richie’s response.

“Let me make it up to you, then,” he said, kissing Eddie passionately and shoving him up against the wall of the closed business they’d found themselves beside.

Gasping into the kiss, Eddie tugged hard on his boyfriend’s hair, breaking them apart, only to close the gap again. In his less than expert opinion, they were getting pretty fucking good at the kissing thing.

It was only a couple more minutes back to Eddie’s house from where they’d stopped and they were both starting to shiver, so they decided to head back. When they reached the top of the hill at the end of Eddie’s street, still hand in hand, Eddie paused, looking over at his boyfriend. “I think you’re it for me, Rich,” he said, so quietly, he was pretty sure Richie hadn’t heard it.

But he had.

They kept one finger interlocked the rest of the way down so that any nosy neighbors might be less likely to gossip about what they thought they might have seen. Richie was glad, a little, that there was less contact. If Eddie had been holding his hand properly, he’d have felt his racing pulse and the nervous sweat on his palm. *You’re it for me too, Eds*, he wanted to say. Hell, if he hadn’t thought it might freak Eddie out, he’d have dropped to one knee and proposed to him with the braided ring on his thumb right then and there.

When they reached the border of the Kaspbrak property, Eddie tugged Richie into the treeline. “You coming up?” he asked, between quick kisses and quicker glances to make sure his mother wasn’t on the porch waiting.

“Meet you there,” Richie said with a smile. He watched Eddie approach the house and leaned back on a tree, pulling a cigarette from his back pocket and lighting it. *I am such a goner*, he admitted to himself, taking a long drag.

Still, the decrepit arcade lent out another set of memories to Richie. He walked over to the old token exchange machine with a pained look. *You’re fuckin’ good. Hey, how ‘bout we go again? Play some more, ya know? Only if you want to. Dude, why are you being weird? I’m not your fucking boyfriend. You assholes didn’t tell me your town was full of little fairies. You trying to bone my little cousin? Get out of here faggot.*

He popped a quarter in and got the silver token out. He flipped it in his palm. He hadn’t meant anything by it. There was no ulterior motive in his asking to play another round of a fucking video game while Stan was in his Sunday Hebrew school class and Eddie was still on house arrest and none of his other friends would even look at him if they ran into each other on the street. Maybe he really was a loser. No capital I. Just a run of the mill, bullied, two friends, scrawny, awkward, trashmouthed *loser*.

Unaware of the subtle shift in Richie’s attitude, Stan crossed his arms, leaning on the old photo booth. “You know, Rich, when Mike said a token, I don’t think he meant an actual-”

“Stan,” Eddie said quietly, trying to warn him off.

Still missing the cue, he shrugged and mouthed “What?” as Eddie stepped over beside him.

“I remember him telling me about this day when it happened. Just, let it be. Let him remember,” he said. After a couple of minutes of entranced staring, Richie’s eyes began to well up with tears. He looked up at Eddie, seemingly startled to see him there, and turned around. “You okay, Richie?” He asked. Not receiving a response, he asked again, a little louder. “Rich?” But Richie was already moving off through the door and into the street. “Let’s go,” Eddie said, taking off after his partner.

Stan was thrown. They dodged the cars in the busy square trying to keep up with him. “Where’s he going?” he asked.

"The bandshell," Eddie called over his shoulder, trying not to lose sight of Richie as he skidded to a stop under a bank of trees, then looked around sadly, almost like he was inside his own memories. Eddie was shaken. All he could hope was that his token didn't trigger this kind of response in him.

"Why?" he asked, suddenly very confused about how Eddie remembered all of this ahead of Richie.

Truthfully, Eddie wasn't even sure. It was just... there. Maybe he was getting it back with Richie, maybe it was something he'd remembered along with his cast, all he knew was that he knew. He remembered practically having to beg Richie to talk to him about it. He knew, even then, that he didn't get all of the details, but now, with the type of things that he was worried about upon their return, he could get a pretty good picture. Eventually, he shouted over his shoulder to Stan, who had fallen behind. "Paul Bunyan." He pointed up at the statue just in time to see the crowd behind Richie freeze. "Fuck. No," the cold fear rolling over Eddie's body could only mean one thing. *It was there*. "No, no, no," he rambled, running toward the man and called out to him. "Okay, Richie, whatever you're seeing, it's not-" Pennywise. But apparently it was. He skidded to a halt and turned back to their friend. "Fuck. Stan, go get the car." When he blinked past Eddie at the clown, seeming to sing something about a *dirty little secret*, Eddie gave him a little shove. "Go. I've got Richie. *Go!*" He turned back to face the scene unfolding, took a deep breath, and charged. "It's not a secret this time, asshole!"

"Eddie, no!" Richie yelled, eyes darting between the two.

Stepping between Richie and Pennywise, he squared off, trying to make himself appear as tall and strong as possible. "Come on, motherfucker! Try me! I'm an open fucking book! What do you want to know?" he taunted. "That you're nothing for either of us to worry about? Come on, asshole!" He was trying to bait him and, unsurprisingly, it wasn't working. Still, he was pissed off and scared. Grown-up Eddie backed into a corner was not something you wanted to face. "Is this your little trick? Just to taunt and tease? You're a waste of our time. You're nothing. Nothing!" He shouted, seeming to stun the old clown long enough for them to get out to Stan at the street. He laced his fingers with his partner's and gave him a pull in

the direction from which Stan had laid on the horn. "Come on, Richie. Let's go." He opened the door and shoved Richie inside, following right along beside and never once let go of his hand.

At first, Richie just about melted into the comfort of his touch before suddenly realizing what it meant. Pennywise *must* have seen. "Let go. Eddie, let me go," he yelped.

Taken aback, but doing as he was told, Eddie moved away, fastening Richie's seatbelt around him, then doing his own. "What happened before we got here."

Richie was shell-shocked. "Nothing. It's fine." He stared at his hands, methodically rubbing at the tip of his middle finger over and over. He could feel Eddie's eyes on him and wasn't ready for it. "Just forget it."

"Was it like last time?" Eddie asked gently.

Suddenly very tired, Richie sighed. "Yes." Then, he thought back over the two instances and realized that, in reality, that wasn't true. "No," he amended quickly, before finally slumping his shoulders. "I don't know. Sort of."

Watching the pair in the rearview mirror, especially how instinctively Eddie moved to preen and comfort, Stan was suddenly hit with a wave of how much he missed Patty. *Strange*, he thought. Then, he realized it. They'd always been like this. *That* was why they always drove him crazy. Because they didn't realize. It was so obvious. The pair in the back seat weren't invited to know what he was suddenly laughing about. Honestly, if he'd mentioned to Richie that it was because of some stupid seven-second video his son had sent him centered around the word *roommates*, he feared that he may unleash a flood of video quotes that he wasn't ready for. He made a mental note to remind himself to call home when he got back to the hotel. Even if all it would do would make Josh groan, at least maybe it would help instill some faith in his son that his old man was getting back to normal. Bekah would inevitably take more convincing, but that had been her nature all along. God, he missed them.

It didn't take long, hardly a block and a wordless *where am I heading*

Eds gesture into the rearview from Stan, for Eddie to lean back into the seat and groan. "I don't believe I'm saying this. Stan, do you remember where my mom's house is?" It was an even shorter amount of time before his mouth had even closed before Eddie regretted the direction. He knew that was the only place, though, and the sooner it was over, the sooner they could get on with their lives. As they pulled up on the split level monstrosity all brick and vinyl and repression.

Standing on his mother's front porch, feeling all of 3 feet tall and 5 years old, Eddie stared at the red door looming ahead of him. "I don't want to do this," he said, expression blank as he took a step back.

Folding his arms and resting on the beam by the steps, Stan egged him on. "Come on, Eds. It's your mother. How long has it been?"

Richie supplied the answer instead. "22 years?" he said, pursing his lips into a frown, "Give or take."

"You moved out and didn't keep in contact with your mother?" Stan asked, finding it more than a little hard to believe. No matter how much he'd hated his mother, how poorly she'd treated him, Stan seemed to remember that Eddie always forgave her. Stan had half expected him to go out and find a woman just like her to marry.

Eddie gave a tense laugh. "I didn't exactly move out," he said, turning to face the two men flanking him.

Head cocked to the side, Stan asked hesitantly, "What do you mean?"

Cradling himself a little, he rocked up onto his tiptoes slowly, avoiding Stan's stare. "Richie and I ran away. The week after graduation." He didn't know why he felt so guilty recounting it to his friend. Stan certainly wouldn't have held it against him. Hell, if Stan had still been in Derry at the end, maybe they would have told him they were together. Or he'd have figured it out. Probably the latter.

Clearing his throat and mimicking Stan's posture. "More accurately, I got thrown out summer before senior year. My parents found out some shit about me that I wasn't ready for them to know and,

clearly,” he gestured flippantly to himself, earning him a loud scoff from Eddie, “I was right.” He swallowed thickly, then looked up at the man who was still avoiding the door. “But, it made Eddie and me realize that maybe we could handle being... roommates,” *and Stan fought to keep a straight face at the word again*, “so, it’s all good, I guess,” he said.

“No shit? I’m sorry, man,” he said, looking down at his feet. Being back in Derry, remembering the upbringings his friends all had, he really couldn’t bring himself to understand the Sonia Kaspbraks and the Wentworth Toziers of the world. How do you just turn your back on your kid?

“No, there’s nothing to be sorry about,” Richie said, shaking his head, then looking pointedly at Eddie. “I don’t regret it for a minute.” He extended his hand and tilted his head ever so slightly, indicating another breach in their plan. Eddie needed him, and like *fuck* was he gonna stand there and let him internally combust when he could help, even just a little.

Without thinking, Eddie accepted his outstretched hand and pulled in snugly as Richie wrapped him in his arms. “I don’t, either. I love our life. I just...” he trailed off, looking back at the door and straightening his posture, “I don’t want to do this. I never thought I would have to.”

Firmly, Richie reminded, “I’m right here. Although,” he trailed off, a hint of mischief in his voice. Over Eddie’s shoulder, he could see Stan trying to get his attention, but he ignored him, “she might be more excited to see me than you. It has been 22 years since she’s had a good night’s-”

“Beep beep, Richie,” Stan said, rolling his eyes and digging his back against the post. *No, Bill, not my fists. No fucking ghosts here, bud*, he thought, amusing himself quietly.

“Fuck you,” Eddie groaned, tugging lightly at the cuff of Richie’s leather jacket.

Richie smiled warmly, doing his best to encourage him. “Fuck you right back,” he said, as softly and fondly as he could manage before

turning Eddie to face the door.

Trembling as he reached his hand out to the knob, Eddie suddenly found himself 12 and on the other side of the door, so close to getting out. “You won’t be going anywhere, young man,” his mother snapped, catching his shoulder with a meaty hand and redirecting him up the stairs.

“You can’t do that,” he protested, trying to grab a hold of anything that would give him the leverage to loose himself from her grasp. What he wanted, more than anything else, was to be with Richie and Stan. His arm was feeling better and Stan would be out of his Hebrew school class soon.

“I can, Eddie-bear! Those boys and that slut are no good for you,” she repeated for the zillionth time since whisking him away from his friends the week prior. She lowered herself in front of him and, with her hands resting heavily on his shoulders, she asked again. “Has she soiled you? Has she put her filthy hands on my precious boy?”

Rolling his eyes despite his better judgment, he answered hurriedly, “No! Beverly’s my friend. She’s just...” he didn’t want to say one of the guys, because that didn’t feel right. She wasn’t. She’ was just Bev. Awesome and funny and smart and brave and he loved her, sure, but not like that. Never like that. She was just, “one of us,” he said finally, before adding a final, “That’s gross.”

“If you think she’s gross, then why are you friends with her?” she said, missing the point completely, “Just like that horrible Tozier boy. You know, Mrs. Bowers told me something about him. I don’t think I like you spending time with any of those hoodlums. Ever since that Bill let his poor, sweet little brother die, you have been spending too much time with them,” she spat, trying to sound simperingly saccharine sweet, probably to temper the way Eddie was trying to will any mutant powers he might have to show themselves right then and vibrate her eyeballs out of her face or boil her blood or something. Nothing. “And look at your arm. They hurt my precious angel,” she whimpered, pulling him into a suffocating hug.

He pushed back in protest. “No, Mommy, you know that’s not true! I-I-I...” he looked up to find her seething at him. He swallowed his

fear and powered through his story again. "I fell! And, you heard the doctor. If Richie hadn't been there to help--"

"I won't hear of it!" She snapped, literally covering her ears to demonstrate. When he'd given up, she stuck out one stubby, rounded finger. "You are housebound until school starts, young man. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Mommy," Eddie answered, defeated.

Glad to have finally won, Mrs. K smoothed down the front of her tracksuit and smiled a wicked smile. "Now, go get some good rest. I love you, Eddie-bear," she chorused, watching him retreat into his bedroom.

Browbeaten and suddenly exhausted, Eddie tucked his chin into his chest. "I love you, too, Mommy," he said, voice sheepishly low. He closed the door behind him, then turned back and propped the desk chair under the knob and took a deep breath, trying to chase himself out of an asthma attack. If his inhaler was fake, then so was his asthma. "Okay. This is bullshit," he said, feeling a little freer. "This is bullshit!" he repeated, pacing, and letting himself feel all of the emotions he'd choked down. The anger, the fear, the hate, the pity, all of it. "Richie didn't do anything wrong. What if she actually never lets me see him again?" he asked himself quietly. "She said Mrs. Bowers... God, what the fuck?" he hissed, bringing his hand to rest over his mouth. "What did you do, Richie?" He stood silently in the middle of the room counting down the seconds until the knock he could only hope would land on his window.

"Alright, playtime's over, Eds," Richie said suddenly, reaching around him to knock on the door, jolting him back to the present. "Do or die time," he said as the door slowly swung open.

Biting his lip nervously, he called out in a voice far too meek to be his own, "Mom? It's Eddie..."

From within, they heard his mother respond, "Eddie-bear? Where have you been, baby? I've missed you!" All three of the men shivered. It was like no time at all had passed.

"I've missed you, too, Mommy," he answered sheepishly. He took a few tentative steps forward, then reached out behind him, silently asking Richie to take his hand. Before he could grasp it, the heavy oaken door slammed shut. When Richie reached to open it, he found it hermetically sealed. He clawed at it frantically, banging and kicking as he did.

"Why did he just close the door?" Stan asked, startled by the sudden change.

Rapidly beginning to lose it, Richie hardly remembered Stan was there. "What the fuck? Eddie! Babe?" he reared back and pounded over and over, "Babe, answer me! Open the door!" He spun around helplessly looking for anything he could drive through the door. Coming up empty, he grabbed fistfuls of his hair and shouted out a strangled "Fuck!" It was just like before, in Neibolt the first time. They'd gone in together and immediately gotten pulled apart. A door slammed between them. When they got home, he was taking every fucking door off the hinges and burning them. This was *not* happening again.

Inside, Eddie crept along in a world frozen in time. From her chair, exactly as she lived in his memory, his mother reached out to grab for him. "I'm glad you left those dirty boys outside and finally came home to me. I've been waiting for you," she cooed, beckoning him on. "I've been waiting so long, Eddie-bear!"

"I'm sorry. I just..." he stammered, searching for the words to express his point. "I needed to go. I needed to be myself." He turned back toward the door, a sinking feeling at the realization that Richie and Eddie hadn't come inside with him. "I needed..." *to be my own man*, his brain supplied, but he found his mouth incapable of saying it to her. Instead, he chose to go with something more tactile. "I needed to be with Richie and I couldn't do that here."

"To be *with* Richie? The Tozier fairy? What, are you a faggot, too?" she sneered, the words curdling on her tongue.

That hurt. It had been years since anyone had called him something like that either such pure vitriol. "I..." he started to deflect, then decided that he wouldn't let her smother him. "Yeah, I am. Cat's out

of the bag, I guess." He dropped his hands to his side with an agitated smack, shoulders square and stance strong. No hunch, no cowering.

"What would your father say?" she said, folding her arms over her chest.

Eddie shrugged. At this point in his life, he was lucky he could pull up any mental image of his Dad. "Hopefully, something along the lines of 'Does he make you happy, son' and then, when I'd answer with more than anything, he'd say 'Good. I'm happy for you. I'll kick his scrawny ass if he ever hurts you.'" He gave a watery smile, realizing once again that he'd never really been in need of that. "But, uh, almost thirty years we've been together and he's never hurt me the way you just did. Never." He shook his head as she stared at him, stone-cold. "Not once, Ma." For someone who'd spent the first eighteen years of his life obsessed with the idea that she was saving him from pain, that idea had been flushed down the tube, drowned in Derry's own sewers.

"I'm not here to protect you from the world. I tried that. You turned out soft. And you abandoned me. You abandoned me, Eddie-bear and now, look at me." He stiffened, coming to the jarring realization that his mother hadn't changed in 22 years. Not only that, but she hadn't aged. It wasn't her. "This is what you've reduced me to." She nearly growled, breaking out into purple lesions and withering away before his eyes. "It'll get you, too. It'll infect you and you're never going to get better. She lunged at him with a dexterity she never possessed before and he jumped back, body slamming against the door and looking desperately for a way out. "You're weak. You're unwell." She said, moving toward him meaning to corner him. "You'll be lucky if you make it out of this house alive. The world will be all the better for it!"

Richie heard the impact of Eddie's body against the door followed by frantic footsteps. "Eddie! Fuck! Come on, babe, not now!" He called after him, trying to kick in the door. When it still didn't work, he sped off around the corner, eyeing "Stan, gimme a boost," he instructed, adding "I used to make it in this window all the time by myself when I was way shorter than this," he assured, "but there used to be a trellis."

"Are you sure?" He asked, clasping his hands together tightly before adjusting them for Richie to use as a step.

"Yes. I can't let him get stuck in there alone. That's not how this works," he said, nearly growling, then pointed in the direction of the house. "And I am not letting his fucking mother stuff us back in the closet," he snapped.

Then, it dawned on him. Suddenly, it was suddenly very real. "Oh," he said, eyes wide and a gentle smile on his face, despite the imminent threat.

"Yeah, oh," Richie said, nodding. He still didn't believe it sometimes, "But later, Staniel. I need to get the fuck in there." He hoisted himself up on the sill and Stan gave him a shove. Once Richie was inside, he ran back to the front porch, kicked out a balustrade, and started using it as a battering ram. "Babe, I'm coming in!" He took off through the house at a sprint in search of Eddie.

Moving away from his mother's rapidly decaying form as it lunged at him, Eddie hissed a spray of curses as he moved toward the kitchen. He came to a stop at the base of the stairs, looking up them with the realization that that was where his token was. In his bedside table lay his bright blue aspirator. That was it. The best way to symbolize the pressurized sterile nothingness of his home life. When made his ascent, he took the stairs in calculated double steps, his mother snarling and nipping at his heels. "What the fuck!" he screeched.

Rounding into his room he reached the drawer and curled his fingers around the cold metal and plastic. He shoved it in his pocket and bolted.

Right into his mother's outstretched arms. "We'll fix this, my Eddie-bear," she said, voice nearly dripping out of her mouth alongside the drool. He struggled against her arms, scratching and kicking.

Hearing the commotion, Richie turned back toward the bedroom at a sprint, only to find Eddie fighting her off adeptly. Just as he got her off of him, seemingly managing to shrink her down to size. She looked at him, eyes wide and scared, then reared back, loosing a spray of thick, black vomit.

"No, no, nononono," he shouted. "No!" He pushed her back against the wall and Richie grabbed a lamp and bashed her over the head. She stumbled, launching into another attack. "Get off," he grunted, laying his entire body weight against her. Richie caught wise to the idea and added, throwing himself against her shoulder. Their combined effort sent the world-be Sonia tumbling down the stairs. By the time she reached the bottom, her body had crumbled to dust and blown out the door Stan had finally managed to wrench open. Wiping his eyes free of the goo, Eddie shoved his hands into his pockets, coming back out with his aspirator. "Got it," he said, rattling it up and down as he tried to calm himself down, taking an exaggerated puff. Richie, once again, grappled with the instinct to take Eddie and bolt.

But Eddie was no damsel in distress. He did *not* need to be saved. What he needed was a shower, to brush his teeth, and to fuck his husband. Maybe not in that order. Brushing his teeth might have had to appear several times in the lineup, actually. In fact, in the split-second Richie was wrestling with his indecision, Eddie had grabbed his hand and they were speeding down the steps, onto the porch, past Stan who followed without question, and to the car, parked at the corner. "Can we go back to the townhouse now?" he asked, leaning back against the still locked door and looking up at Richie, completely and utterly spent. Maybe a nap needed to make its way onto his to-do list. Possibly even higher than Richie.

And God did *that* prioritization make him feel old.

"Anything you want, babe," Richie said, voice low, but confident. He didn't even stop to think that maybe, just maybe, admitting his feelings, even a little, had made it a little less scary. He didn't acknowledge the lack of a knot in his stomach when he grabbed Eddie's hand and ran his thumb over it gently. "You okay?" he asked, digging a pack of tissues out of Eddie's jacket pocket for him and gently swiping the slick mess off of his face.

He shook his head, quickly answering, "Yeah. Fine," despite the trembling hands serving as a dead giveaway that no, *no he was not fine*. He was so far away from fine he couldn't even pick up the signal anymore. Still, he leaned into his husband and kissed him, digging his hands in his hair and drinking him in. When he broke

away, he hissed a wary, "Shit," then turned slowly to Stan, stammering as he struggled to come up with an excuse. "I, uh..."

Instead, Stan simply raised his eyebrows and shook his head. His expression as obvious as ever, practically screaming *I really don't give a shit, you two* marked him as unmoved by the exchange. "Dude, you're fine. Kiss your..." he stopped, looking down at their joined hands for a moment, noticing no rings, he still asked skeptically "Husband?" Richie shook his head. "No? Jesus. Okay, fiancé?" Eddie drew his lips into a tense line and shook his head too. Stan groaned. He and patty had married as quickly as they could get it together. He couldn't imagine waiting this long to get married. "God, what is taking you so long? Tell me he's at least your boyfriend and this has not been some platonic life mate thing and you're just now coming to terms with your sexualities because, so help me, I will make you both walk back to the townhouse rather than deal with it for one second longer," he said, very clearly kidding, except for that one little voice in the back of their heads that thought, maybe, to take him seriously. Stan was truly spiteful sometimes and neither of them wanted to be the ones to have him lose his battle with his self-control as he flipped his metaphorical wig.

Richie laughed quietly at Stan's reaction. Instead of kissing him, He pulled him closer, so that he was directly in front of him, facing Stan as well. He wrapped his arms around him and Eddie rested his back against Richie. Comfortable. Safe. "Partner is the word you're looking for, at this point, I guess. We're too old for boyfriends," he said. He kissed the top of Eddie's head gently, then added. "We've been together all along. Since we were sixteen. What, two weeks after he left?" he directed the last part at the man in his arms for confirmation.

"Something like that," he answered, turning his head to look up at the taller man. "Why did we wait so long?"

"To drive me nuts, that's why. Jesus!" Stan groaned, smiling despite himself and with no real weight to his dismay. He was happy for them. This made sense. This felt right. Even when they were too young to have known it, Eddie and Richie had always been *EddieAndRichie* , a package deal.

Rolling his eyes, Eddie replied in his hysterically quick patter, “Yes, Stanley, we both chose to repress our sexualities and deny ourselves more years to the relationship that we’ve been in since high school to deal with a town where, even now, people are getting jumped and almost killed for being gay, only to have that be the catalyst to making them an appetizer for a fucking clown just to drive you nuts,” he laughed, gently rubbing his hands over Richies as he signaled to Stan to get in the car and started moving them that way himself. “You don’t think there would have been easier ways to do that?” he asked as he opened the front door for Richie, then moved to the backseat for himself.

When he finally reached the driver’s side door, Stan looked over at his friends, Eddie leaning up to rub an unnaturally quiet Richie’s shoulders. “Do the other Losers know?”

Eddie shook his head, quietly answering “No.”

Stan thought it over for a moment. “Not even Mike?” he asked. He knew that Mike had still been in Derry when he left and he couldn’t imagine that they just abandoned him. He had to have at least suspected.

“Not even Mike,” he affirmed, suddenly feeling a little guilty about that again.

All things considered, Stan got why they hadn’t told anyone. He’d seen the news article about the two young men who’d been attacked the day Mike had called them. Derry had never been safe, but that couldn’t have been an easy thing for them to see. “Well, thank you for telling me, then,” he said, looking over at his friends. A gentle smile played at his features. It felt right, being the secret keeper again.

Before Stan drove away, Eddie turned to take one last look at his childhood home and found the space to have changed completely; The house was dilapidated. The vinyl siding was falling off, the red shutters were chipped and peeling, the brick first floor was crumbling in disrepair. He felt his chest tighten at the realization that it was all a trick. It was nothing. They were fine. He reached his hand into the front seat and grasped Richie’s, immediately feeling a little better. At

least that was out of the way.

By the time they had reached the Townhouse, though, all three men were too deep in their own heads to be comfortable. Eddie had closed his eyes for the majority of the ride. Not sleeping, just trying to zone out. Richie hadn't had to try. His mind was a constant swarm of *not real* and *wanna go home* and *what the fuck* and *gotta keep Eddie safe*. Stan, however, just focused on the drive, occasionally looking over at the vaguely catatonic forms of his friends. The car stopped and they opened their doors simultaneously. On the walk up to the Townhouse, Richie and Eddie walked side by side, hands clasped together, and Stan behind them. Eddie looked over at Richie and let go, opening the front door and made a beeline for the stairs. Richie entered next. Stan sighed heavily, closed the door and fell in, watching them head up for their room.

"Hey, you guys get what you needed?" Bev asked from where she and Ben were sitting on the steps.

"Yeah," Eddie answered quickly, squeezing around Bev against the wall.

She glanced back at him curiously as Ben called out, "What's all over you?"

He didn't stop. "Nothing," he answered, intending for it to be just that as soon as he could make it to the bathroom.

Noticing the second man making this way toward them, Ben turned to him. "Richie, what's-"

"Move."

Bev shook her head, reaching a gentle hand to him. "Honey, talk to me. What hap-"

"Move," he repeated, a little stronger. It was clear she wasn't going to be getting an answer from him, so she slid over, resting against Ben's leg. As soon as she had created enough space, Richie sped up the stairs in as few steps as he could manage.

Finally reaching the stairs himself, Stan sat down on the first landing

so he could face Ben and Bev. “Things were traumatic for them. We stuck together,” he said simply.

“But...” the pair glanced at each other, seemingly asking if that had been an option.

He shook his head, trying to rationalize what had happened and knowing there was no way to do it. “To hell with that *we have to split up* bullshit. It was safer this way and we got what we needed. But, it was... rough for them,” he looked up the stairs, toward Richie and Eddie’s room, sadly. “My summer was boring without you guys, honestly, so for me it was just...” he labored a moment to come up with the right word, “introspective.” Taking a deep breath, he continued on, careful not to divulge any information they clearly didn’t want out. “They, apparently, had a harder go of things that summer,” he concluded.

Bev and Ben looked upstairs, too. Unable to shake her ever-mounting concern, she began to ask, “Are they...” but she was cut off by Stan’s hand, flexed upward, gently signaling for her to stop. “Okay,” she conceded, reaching out to take Stan’s still outstretched hand. They just had to wait for Bill to come back.

5. The Twist Of Fate When It All Broke Down

Summary for the Chapter:

Once they get back to the Townhouse, the Losers get a firsthand refresher in the unique ways in which all hell breaks loose in Derry.

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, so, here's a massive warning: Visions of Suicide (albeit a Pennywise Vision), Blood, Stabbing, Spiders.

But, uh, I mean, we've all seen the canon material so most of this shouldn't be a surprise.

Safe. They were safe. Safe in the walls of the townhouse which, by all rights was still Derry, so who could really say if that was safe or not. Probably not. But it was something.

And, they'd told Stan and Richie didn't have a meltdown so that was good.

All in all, now it was time to start checking things off of Eddie's to-do list. He turned to where his partner was lying on the bed staring at the ceiling and decided that, yeah, he was definitely combining items. "I'm gonna shower. Get all this shit off me," he said, before adding a sultry, "Come with?" Normally, his attempt at seduction would have at least gotten him a laugh. Nothing. Deafening silence. He reached out, tracing his fingertips over the skin on the inside of Richie's arm. "Hey, Richie," he teased, hoping that, maybe, a more direct approach would rouse him. "I'm going to be showering. Naked. And I would like, very much, to not be alone while I do that." He sighed and looked around the room deftly. Maybe Richie was going to be the most difficult item on his to-do list after all. He stared down at his light eyes and traced his thumb over his cheek. "You don't have to get in with me, but please, just come sit on the counter or something." He leaned down, careful not to touch the bed. Lifting Richie's hand in his own, he watched him carefully. "I don't

want to be alone right now." He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He knew better than anyone how Richie's mind worked. Even Richie most of the time. The motormouthing. The almost obsessive rubbing of his fingers. The exaggerated reactions. The lengthy silence on the car ride. He was about to hit his limit and, with everything else they had going on, he'd nearly missed it. Without being able to talk to his therapist, he was going to have to be it. "Fuck, Richie, you don't get to do this right now. You don't get to shut down now, okay? Whatever you saw, tell me." He sat cross-legged on the floor and waited patiently. He hated seeing Richie like this but he could only imagine how bad it must have felt from the other side. Five minutes passed and Eddie moved to sit on the bed. He rubbed his hand up and down Richie's arms, knowing the repetitive motion and constant physical contact helped some.

After another painfully long silence, Richie said, so quietly Eddie second-guessed whether or not he'd said anything at all, "I was never afraid of clowns."

"What?" Eddie asked.

Clearing his throat a little, allowing himself to be more sure of his voice, Richie continued to stare at the ceiling, afraid of what would happen if he actually looked at Eddie. "When we were kids, I told you guys that my biggest fear was clowns. That wasn't it. I had two that were neck and neck," he said, closing his eyes and internally berating himself for even mentioning it. What difference did it make anymore? It was stupid, and just like before, verbalizing them made them real. Verbalizing them gave the fucking clown power over him, still, he had to tell him. He was in it now, so he listed them, "people finding out I'm gay and losing you."

Eddie furrowed his brow. "Losing me?" The last time they'd done this, he hadn't exactly had him anyway. They were 12. It wasn't as high stakes. Of course, he'd known he had a crush on him then, but that shouldn't have made that something for Richie to fear. He should have known that that wasn't even an option.

With a subtle shake of his head, Richie sat up beside him and pulled him close. "You're the most important person in my life. You always have been, Eds. And now that we have to fight it again, I'm

terrified.” Eddie laced their hands together and looked over at him sympathetically. He was terrified, too, but nothing had really happened yet. The scene at the restaurant was a lot, but Stan was okay. Realizing that they’d forgotten all of their best friends and that they’d battled It was a trip, but that wasn’t something they could help. As of right then, all of their encounters with It, in the park and at his mother’s house, had been fairly easy. They’d been jarring and traumatizing, but they’d managed it. They were safe. They’d even told Stan they were together and the world hadn’t spontaneously combusted. He’d panic when it was time. In the meantime, he needed to keep Richie grounded. Clinging to Eddie for dear life, Richie continued, “I’m terrified that something is going to happen to you. I just...” he trailed off and kissed an exposed spot on Eddie’s, trying to cover for how he was searching for the right words. “Ever since fucking Mike called, I have this overwhelming sense of dread that something’s going to happen to you. The reason I wanted to keep it to ourselves was...”

“You didn’t want It to know because if It knows, It can use me against you or you against me,” Eddie supplied. He knew that was part of it. He wanted to argue that, by that logic, he was at risk no matter what, and if he had the choice, he’d rather have his fucking partner by his side than be kowtowing to It, but if it helped Richie, he wasn’t going to argue. He’d go along with it.

Dragging his hand along the small of Eddie’s back gently, he continued to nuzzle along the back of his neck. “But it doesn’t matter, does it? It used you against me when we were kids,” he admitted, something he’d never told Eddie all those years before. “It knew then. I don’t know why I thought it would matter,” he mused. He was, truthfully, a little ashamed of himself, on top of everything else. He’d lived the majority of his life out and proud. Derry should not have been the thing to send him careening back into the closet.

Eddie’s expression softened as he looked at him. “Is that why you told Stan?”

A tense laugh escaped Richie’s throat against his will. He wished that was why. In fact, he’d own that. It sounded so much braver than the reality. “*That* and when the door closed behind you, I might have... momentarily... in my panic... forgotten we were hiding it and called

you babe,” he admitted sheepishly.

Eddie nodded, “Ah. That’ll do it.” He pulled Richie down into a slow kiss. Richie melted into him. Eddie stood, guiding Richie to the edge of the bed. He positioned himself between Richie’s legs, meaning to guide him up off the bed, but paused. With his hand on his lover’s neck, he locked eyes with him. “So, you know we have to tell everyone else now, right? Because that’s not fair to hold over Stan,” he said gently.

Swallowing thickly, Richie acquiesced. “When everything else is over and we’ve killed this motherfucker,” he said. The problem wasn’t telling the Losers. That was never the problem.

Fucking Derry.

Well aware that he was fighting a losing battle there, Eddie shook his head. “Okay. When it’s over,” he agreed. He ran his hands down Richie’s arms to his hands and started tugging him forward. “Now, are you really going to make me shower alone?” he asked playfully.

No. No, that wasn’t something Richie would do. If Eddie played his cards right, then maybe they wouldn’t have to tell the Losers. They’d be able to figure it out on their own. That would certainly make for an interesting conversation before they left for the library. He followed his man readily, stopping briefly to wonder where Eddie had unpacked the lube and look for it.

“I don’t believe I had to deal with the fucking puke again,” he hissed, turning on the sink and starting to brush his teeth, adding a sharp “Again.” He scrubbed and scrubbed, spitting out the toothpaste. “This is really too fucking far,” he groaned, starting over.

As he rifled through the drawer and came out with the tiny travel-sized bottle, he called out “Again? You dealt with that the first time?” Somehow, he could hardly imagine little Eddie with his fanny pack and his short shorts *oh my god*, he thought, *how did I ever forget the short shorts- I know what he’s getting for Christmas* and his inhaler dealing with anything similar to what he’d just dealt with on his own. Not that he couldn’t have done it, he just couldn’t see it. Maybe he just didn’t want to. Just like he desperately didn’t want to

remember Eddie's head sticking out of the mattress, spewing identical black bile all over Neibolt.

"Yuh- *huh* ! You don't remember? Right before we beat it, it turned into a leper and *spewed all over me*. God, I don't believe you don't remember" he answered and looked up at the medicine chest finding it askew and shutting it. "At the pharmacy, I-"

But his story was cut off.

"It's your time, Eddie," came a gruff voice from the haggard face behind him in the newly-adjusted reflection. *Bowers* .

Hearing the hoarse, unfamiliar voice, Richie hurtled himself across the room and into the bathroom, grasping firmly on the intruder's greasy fucking mullet and bashing his head against the wall. "Think again, dickhead," he spat, repeating the motion.

The pair struggled as Eddie looked on, stunned by the sudden change and *how the fuck had he gotten in there , how long had he been there , and oh god, what was he gonna do to us* . Adrenaline coursing through his veins, Richie managed to slam Bowers to the ground and keep him there. The problem was he didn't have a weapon.

Bowers, on the other hand, did.

He snaked his hand down into the pocket of his sweats and retrieved the same switchblade he'd used to carve into Ben's stomach when they were kids. Before he knew what was happening, the business end of the knife was slammed into Richie's cheek.

At first, Richie didn't even realize what happened. He thought he'd been punched and the blood in his mouth was just from the impact with his teeth. His arms were longer than Bowers and he had him restrained fairly easily. When he thought the hard part was done, he swiped his tongue across the inside of his cheek and found himself fighting a battle not to lose the contents of his stomach as the final piece clicked into place. The flood of blood in his mouth had been too much to be a bite. He'd thought it might have been sweat dripping down the outside. No. No, he'd been stabbed. *Huh* .

“Richie!” Eddie screamed, suddenly regaining the use of his function. He still found himself trembling, frozen to the spot. There was so much blood. Richie’s blood. Richie had been stabbed. His heart seemed to tighten at the realization.

When the attacker reared back, withdrawing the knife, Eddie flinched. Leave the foreign object in the wound. That’s elementary stab wound care. Survival for Dummies. Now, apart from *bleeding*, Richie was also susceptible to all sorts of *infections* and what sort of *worse* damage had he done by just *pulling it out* and jagged edges are so much more difficult to suture and oh *God* Richie got *stabbed*. He had to help him.

Despite all his recent panic and recently uncharacteristically withdrawn nature, Richie’s fight or flight mode was still intact. He was not going to let some bastard school-yard bully be the reason he died in Derry. He knocked Bowers’ hand against the floor as hard as he could and it released its grip with a sickening crunch. The knife went flying across the floor, under the clawfoot tub. “I’m alright,” he assured, watching Eddie’s panic-stricken face. He leaned back, attempting to pin Bowers down more surely, but granted him the chance to get the upper hand. He lunged forward, his stubby hands wrapped around Richie’s neck. “Eds, get the knife,” he choked out, sliding his fingers under the man’s hands and fighting his long legs up to try to push him off.

As though a switch had been thrown within him, Eddie sprung back to action. He scrambled under the porcelain tub and retrieved the weapon, only missing it the first two times his fingers grazed it. By the time he’d turned around and given a little space, Eddie stabbed him, hilt angled upward and he hit something he could only assume was bone. He stumbled back and Eddie gave him a hard shove sending him backward, head colliding with the porcelain of the bath, as Richie slumped to the ground, gasping for breaths. Both stared for a moment before realizing that they were, arguably, *safe*.

“Holy shit,” Eddie hissed, when his faculties started to return. “Are you okay?”

Panting as his pulse began to return to normal and the impact of what had just happened in the last two minutes landed hard on him,

he replied flippantly, "Yeah, I'm fine." He hissed as Eddie gently pressed a clean washcloth to the gash. "'Tis but a scratch! Just a flesh wound," Richie joked in a ridiculous English accent, slightly muddled by the searing pain in his cheek.

"Come on, idiot. Let me get you cleaned up," Eddie laughed, moving to help him off the ground. Mentally, he began going over what he'd need to take care of Rich. He could probably make do what he had brought with them. When Bev had asked him the night before if he'd become a doctor, he'd laughed it off. He'd entertained the idea for a while, but when he and Richie'd finally started college after two years to get on their feet, he couldn't fathom spending the next seven years in school and quickly changed from pre-med to economics. Now, he thought, if they ever got out of here, maybe he could...

Snapping Eddie out of his temporary daydream, "I think either of us cleaning up is not in the cards, babe," he joked, suddenly a little lightheaded. *Just got up too fast*, he told himself, *nothing extraordinary*.

"Just the *wound*," Eddie chastised, getting him back to the bed and moving to collect the supplies from where he'd stored them. " *You're* a lost cause. I know that," he called over his shoulder as he wrenched the ancient dresser open to get the sewing kit from the drawer before moving to the nightstand for the first aid kit.

Feigning insult, but laughing nevertheless, he called out a warbling "Hey!" Tucking his legs up under himself, he felt oddly young. Of course they come back to Derry and of course, something happens where Eddie had to take care of him. Then, it hit him. What had he been worried about? Eddie was the strong one. Eddie was the brave one. Eddie was the smart one. Richie was the one who charged headlong into situations where Eddie was concerned and wound up just like this. Cross-legged on the bed, waiting for treatment from good ol' Dr. K.

Once he had everything he needed and a plan of action, he stopped and took a deep breath to balance himself. Finally, he turned back and focused on Richie, situating himself right between his thighs. The first thing he did was take his partner's hands and place them on his waist, closing them a little so he'd have something to grab on to.

“Alright. Stay still and relax your face.” Richie, being Richie, screwed up his face a little, clenching his eyes shut and dropping his jaw a little. Eddie stared at him for a moment, wondering which part of his directions was unclear when the other man sucked his bottom lip in between his teeth. Rolling his eyes, Eddie reached out and flicked his arm. “I said relax, not make *that* face.”

Countering Eddie quickly, and he *had* a point, he said: “When am I ever more relaxed than...”

“The one after that,” Eddie answered as he rested his hand gently on Richie’s neck, tilting his head so that the wounded cheek was facing the ceiling.

Richie softened a little, giving up the banter for now. “Okay,” he acquiesced, taking a deep breath. Slowly but surely, the gravity of the situation began to settle in on him.

Pouring some peroxide out of the bottle and onto a cotton pad, Eddie looked Richie in the eyes. “Now, this is gonna sting,” he warned, mouth downturned into a sympathetic frown.

“Babe, I just got stabbed, I think-” he started to argue but was cut off when Eddie made a clear *you asked for it* face and pressed the pad to his cheek. All words flew from his mind except one, a tensely hissed “fuck.”

Nodding, a wordless *I told you so* , Eddie backed off with a “Yep,” switching out for a new piece of cotton to disinfect one more time, *and maybe one more past that for good measure*, before putting on some antibacterial ointment and toying with whether or not to bother stitching the cheek. He knew they didn’t normally suture puncture wounds, and he certainly didn’t want to maim Richie, but he just wasn’t sure. He wasn’t sure of much at the moment. All he knew was that he had to take care of him. “You got stabbed, Rich,” he said quietly as he paused, tears that he didn’t notice had begun to fall started streaming harder. He considered the man in front of him. Richie- *his Richie* - had gotten stabbed. And all because someone was in their bathroom, waiting to attack *him* .

Fuckin’ Derry.

Just then, coming into the doorway cautiously were Bev, Ben, and Stan. “We heard a noise,” Bev said, before settling on Richie and letting out a shrill scream.

Scrambling into the room, Ben asked quickly, looking around for other signs of distress, “Are you guys okay?”

“What the fuck, Richie?” Stan asked, moving beside Eddie and resting his hip against the footboard.

Ben, too, stopped by their side, hands white-knuckle tense on the hardwood. “What happened?” he asked.

“Bowers,” Richie answered as Eddie burned the tip of the needle he was still unsure if he was going to use. “He’s in the tub,” he said, strangely calm. Ben and Stan looked at each other, immediately concerned and bolted for the door, each grabbing heavy objects from around the room, Stan, a vase, Ben, a lamp. “Dead,” he called after them, for the sake of clarity, even though they’d obviously have known by then.

“What?” Bev whimpered. She moved from the doorway to sit on the bed beside Richie, placing her hand gently on his thigh. Richie cupped one hand over hers, but left the other still fisted in Eddie’s shirt, absently pulling him closer, legs now wrapped around Eddie. If Bev noticed the intimacy of their position, thankfully, she didn’t mention it.

A hushed, worried “What the fuck?” was heard from the bathroom. “There’s so much blood...” Richie strained to hear who the speaker was, but the adult voices of his friends were still new to him. He thought it was Stan, but when the men stepped out, it didn’t really matter.

Stan, folding his arms and resting against the doorframe, emerged first. “So, I’ve got good news and bad news,” he said. “Good news is you guys aren’t going to jail for murder.”

Eyes wide, Eddie looked at Richie. Richie, however, had his eyes trained on Stan. “What’s the bad news?”

Proving himself to be the unseen speaker, Ben shook his head sadly. "Bowers is gone," Bev looked at him curiously. Richie squeezed his eyes shut. Eddie turned back to look at his friend. That wasn't *possible*. "He pulled the knife straight out of his chest," Ben added, fingers absently grazing the scar by his hip that he now knew was the man in question's handiwork. He shook his head, bewildered, finishing with "which would have been badass if it wasn't absolutely terrifying, and hopped into a blue Trans Am and booked it. He seemed pissed."

Richie shrugged. "I would be, too, if I crawled out of the 80's still looking like a fucking Steven Seagal villain."

Eddie looked around at the Losers in their room and took a mental headcount. "Shouldn't Bill be back by now?" he asked, finally deciding he was too chicken shit to suture Richie's cheek, as he lathered some Neosporin on a square of gauze and set about taping it down.

"He left again," Bev answered. "He said he had to go to the festival for something, but he'll be back."

Squeezing his eyes shut, Richie released a tense "Shit," before remembering he was supposed to have his face relaxed. No part of him wanted to relax at that moment, so he wrote himself a free pass. At least he remembered.

Eddie, however, groaned. "Okay, and Mike?" he asked, hoping beyond hope that he was on his way to Bill.

No such luck. "Library, probably," Bev supplied with a shrug.

Ben then realized what Eddie was getting at. "Fuck. Okay. We should spl-"

"No!" Eddie and Richie answered in unison, both feeling the panic rising within them at the mere suggestion. Each had silently decided that the other was not leaving their sight for the rest of their time in Derry. No. They were stronger together.

Stan, too, answered as the couple did. "No more splitting up! That's

a stupid plan,” he insisted. His tone was loud and sharp. *No! No ‘next time,’ Bill!* Stan was done having other people decide for him. If neither of their group’s “leaders” were going to think about the group as a whole, someone had to.

“We stay together,” Eddie said, allowing himself to be calmer than Stan by virtue of his divided focus. “We’ll get Mike first,” he said. When he caught Bev’s questioning glance, he clarified, “Bill’s in public. Mike’s alone.” Eyes wide with fear, Bev tried to convince herself that that was the right choice. “You guys go, Richie and I will be right behind.” Stan shot a worried glance over his shoulder at the pair. He was loath to leave them alone again. “We’re fine, Stan. I’ve got him.” He nodded and disappeared into the hall. Three sets of footsteps padded down the stairs and off into the distance. As promised, Eddie was done shortly after the front door had clicked shut.

Grabbing their keys off the nightstand, Richie stood up and felt the room spin a little. When his vision came back to center, he grabbed Eddie by the hand and started to move into the hall with a sharp “Let’s go.”

Snagging the ring of keys out of Richie’s hand, Eddie corrected. “I’m driving.”

“What? No,” Richie said, trying to snatch them back from Eddie. “Eds, I’m fine,” he whined, missing Eddie’s hand by a solid 4 inches.

Eddie moved his hand as a test and Richie missed by an even greater margin. *Yeah, not happening.* “You got stabbed in the face, asshole,” he said, no edge to his words. More a plea than anything else. “With the blood loss? *Nuh-uh* .” He tried to keep his tone final, but Richie was far from done.

As they reached the car, Richie refused to let go of his hand. “Need I remind you,” he started, then, using his height to his advantage, finally managed to recollect the keys, “that you are the one that crashed your car two days ago?”

However, Eddie’s stare, when provoked, was enough to make anyone who knew better back down. “Gimme the keys,” he said, voice low.

Richie's shoulders slumped but he didn't oblige. "If you pass out behind the wheel and drive us both into the canal, what good are we?" Eddie's expression, to a passerby, would have been unreadably nonchalant.

To Richie, however, he knew his battle was lost. He dropped the keys into Eddie's second, still outstretched hand, and clasped it tightly. "Let's not get caught. Let's keep goin'," he quoted in a thick drawl.

"See, not comforting, Thelma," Eddie said, bunching up his nose and shaking his head. He opened the door for Richie, then pressed his hand to the small of his back. "Get in," he coached, adding a quick, "Watch your head." Seeing that Stan's car was still waiting just ahead of theirs, he called out with a wave. "We'll see you guys there."

Richie reached his hand out the window after them, making a useless grabbing motion at the car. "Save me!" he called out but received nothing but a middle-finger salute from Stan.

As he climbed in, Eddie leaned over a little too far, kissing Richie once, as gentle as he could. When they broke apart he took a deep breath. He was as ready as he'd ever be, he supposed. "Let's go," he said, starting the car and taking off quickly in the direction of the library.

Zippping through the streets of Derry as the radio played on the same synced playlist from one of their phones they'd been listening to, Richie found himself sucked back to a warm summer night in the middle of the desert in 1993. Back when they were young and dumb and already too far away from Derry to know anything much more than how much in love with each other they were.

"What are you doing?" Eddie asked, looking around at the vast expanse of emptiness. He fought off the bubbling fear he felt. They'd just stopped for gas. The car was running fine.

Richie shrugged. "Putting the car in park," he answered. His words were plain, but he didn't much care. Eddie would see, eventually. He just had to wait.

But wait was not a word in the Edward Kaspbrak vocabulary index. "Why?" he asked, in place of waiting to just see as it happened.

He cranked the volume on the stereo and raised one eyebrow at Eddie suggestively. "Because," came his totally descriptive and not-at-all-annoying response.

"What are you doing?" Eddie asked again, voice straining over the sound.

All too typical air of mischief written all over his face, Richie swung the door open. "Getting out of the car," he said as he did just that. "Jesus, Eds. Keep up," he called playfully as he ran around to the passenger side and moved to pull Eddie out along with him.

The road was deserted. They were another hour from the hotel they'd called ahead to reserve from an interstate coupon booklet. The heavily synthesized arpeggios carried out into the street. He wrapped Eddie tightly in his arms and started to sway back and forth to the bluesy rhythm of the old King Harvest song.

Resting against his boyfriend's chest, Eddie looked up at him. "Ok, seriously, what are you doing?" he asked for the final time, wondering if there was something he was missing.

Richie shook his head. "Dancing in the moonlight," he answered, spinning Eddie effortlessly and pulling him out into the middle of the street, "With my boyfriend," he added, kissing him quickly, finishing with "In the middle of the desert." With Eddie's right hand in his left, Eddie's left on his shoulder, and his right firmly on Eddie's ass, he couldn't think of a single place he'd rather be. He leaned down to kiss him, guiding him closer with every passing moment. When, acting on muscle memory, Eddie pulled back and looked around tentatively. Richie shook his head and danced Eddie closer to the hood of the car and pressed him back against it. "There's no one around to see and do you know what? Even if there were, I don't think I would care," Richie admitted. He wasn't sure what had happened to him over the past couple of days, but whatever it was, he was so glad it had happened. He loved Eddie so much and the prospect of starting over with him felt so right and calming, even if he couldn't put his finger on what was so wrong with Maryland... no,

Maine, *Maine*- to begin with. He kissed Eddie again, lifting him straight off the ground and kissing him.

"You're crazy," Eddie said, laughing as Richie put him down and started dancing, all arms and legs and unbridled enthusiasm. Eddie took a step back to watch. He wanted to remember this Richie. Happy, carefree, young and, most importantly, *his* .

Realizing he was dancing alone, Richie pouted, pulling Eddie back into his arms. "Crazy for you, babe," he said before leaning down and capturing Eddie once more in a long, hungry kiss. *One more song*, he promised himself, *one more then I gotta get him into a hotel because I can't wait anymore*.

23 years down the line, as the same song played on through an entirely-too-expensive sound system, Richie reached a hand over onto the steering wheel and pulled Eddie's hand his lips. "Crazy for you, babe," he echoed.

Eddie smiled despite himself. When Richie released his hand, he brought it to rest on the back of his head, weaving his fingers into Richie's hair almost possessively. *Mine* .

Somehow, Stan, Bev, and Bill didn't make it to their destination first. No sign of a blue Trans Am, or their childhood bully, they headed out of the car in search of Mike. "So, what do we do if Bowers is there?" Eddie asked quietly as they crossed the threshold.

Richie looked over at Eddie, hardly believing that he was going to say what he was about to. "Kill him," he answered, even more quietly than Eddie.

Releasing a breath, he hadn't known he'd been holding, Eddie nodded. That was his only idea, too. "Good to know we're on the same page," he said.

Crash .

From above them, clear signs of a struggle sounded. Eddie's hand dropped to Richie's wrist, fingers curled protectively around him.

"Shit," Richie hissed, moving toward the staircase. "Here we go."

Before they even made it halfway up, the front door swung open.

"Mike?" called out Stan. Bev kept step beside him, too scared to speak.

Ben overlapped him, voice closing in. "Mikey, you in here?" he yelled.

From the steps, Eddie turned back, a warning "Shh."

Richie, on the other hand, kept moving. Nearing the scuffling men, seeing blood gushing from Mike's arm, he set his sights on Bowers, a knife pressed to Mike's throat. He plucked a hatchet from a shattered display case and charged. The stone head buried itself in the attacker's skull with a sickening squelch. Desperate to fill the sudden silence, Richie started to joke. "I guess you could say that was long overdue." Looking down at his friend, paNting on the floor, having shoved Bowers' corpse off, but still too stunned to move. "Geddit? We're in a library-" but as he started to explain, his adrenaline made way to panic, laced with ever-present nausea, and he found himself sick all over the floor.

Mike simply groaned, flopping back dramatically.

"Take it easy, Richie," Eddie cooed, rubbing small circles on his back.

Richie wondered, despite himself, when everyone else had come upstairs. He hoped, weakly, *stupidly*, that Eddie hadn't seen any of that. Obviously, it had to happen, but still, he couldn't help but worry about what would happen to Eddie's trust in him if he'd just watched him murder someone in cold blood. "Thanks," he offered, standing up and wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

"You alright, man?" came Ben's worried voice from behind him.

Richie stood up straight, eyes wide. He didn't mean to snap. Really, He didn't. But what type of dumbass question was that? Were any of them okay at that point? How could they be? If any of them even tried to say that they were, they were lying. "No! I just killed a guy that stabbed me in the face and had Mike-"

"I was asking Mikey," he corrected sheepishly.

In short order, Eddie had Mike patched up and they sat, waiting on pins and needles for Bill to show. After five minutes, a veritable eternity, Mike tired of waiting. He dug his phone from his pocket and pressed the contact.

When the ringing stopped, Mike immediately jumped in first. "Bill, man, we're all at the library. Where you at?" He listened patiently to Bill's breathing and the sounds of the carnival. "Festival, nevermind. You alright?" he asked, realizing that he knew the answer to the first question, hoping to spare Bill the stress of having to answer that, remembering how angry he would get over his stammer sometimes. The more nervous or flustered he got, the worse it got.

"It k-k-k-killed a kid man," he shouted into the phone, hardly able to hear his own voice above the pounding of his heart. "It t-t-took a k-kid r-r-r-right in f-f-f-f-fucking f-f-front of me," he said. The startled murmur of the crowd gave away that Bill was just about shoving his way through. And by the tremoring in his voice and the urgency of his stutter... he was crying. He was terrified. Worst of all, he was alone.

"Just come back to the library," Mike said, voice trembling. Something in the pit of his stomach clenched at the idea of Bill being out there alone. "We'll talk strategy. We'll-"

"N-n-n-no. I h-h-h-have to k-kill It," he insisted. The fear in his voice was palpable.

Closing her hand over Mike's shoulder, Bev leaned down so she could eavesdrop better. Ben didn't hesitate to move along with her, his hand on the small of her back instinctively, like it had always been there. "And we will. Just, come back here first," he begged. Stan sat on the table beside Mike and looked at him, worried. Eddie moved closer to Richie, who draped his arm around him protectively. He pressed his strong fingers into Eddie's ribs. Deciding that, fuck it, he was done letting the clown dictate his life, Richie kissed Eddie's temple quickly. It didn't matter that no one saw, all too distracted by Bill's suicide mission to even glance their way. He'd done it, in front of their friends.

Fighting off his friends, Bill answered as quickly as he could. "I don't want any of you to get k-k-k-killed with me," he said. Mike could hear the telltale sounds of a bike being brought to its wheels and pedaled.

"Bill! Bill, wait! Don't hang up the..." Too late. The line went dead and Mike's veins filled with ice water. "Fuck. He's going to fight It alone," he reported, knocking the device against his head a few times.

Furrowing his brows, Richie let out a quiet, "What?"

"Alone!" he said, tossing the phone to the desk with an unceremonious thud. "It's about the *group*," he explained, sounding desperate and almost crazed. "The ritual doesn't work without the group. Doing it together is why it worked."

That was something Richie was stuck on. "Mike, if they killed It before, if the ritual worked... how did It come back?" he asked. He'd been trying to fight off his skepticism, but now? Now, he was growing used to it. It was always at his side like a neighborhood stray he'd made the mistake of feeding.

The previous question was plowed over, however, by Ben. "Did he tell you where he was going?" he asked.

Folding his arms across his chest and hanging "If he really wanted to kill Pennywise, there's only one place he'll go," Stan answered, looking at Richie sympathetically. He'd been wondering about that, too, but it wasn't the time. They needed to defeat It and if this Ritual of Chewed or what-the-fuck-ever was their best bet, then who were they to judge the people before them who had tried and failed?

Mike turned to make sure he was facing all of the gathered Losers. "The same place the ritual needs to be performed," he said with a sigh.

"Ahh, we're not gonna like this are we?" Eddie asked, leaning a little more familiarly against Richie, hand sneaking up his chest.

Similarly, Richie felt that dread. Except, unfortunately, he knew

exactly what that meant and was already fighting off the instinct to split. “Fuck,” he hissed, watching Mike grapple with himself. “Just say it, Mikey.”

Neibolt.

He didn’t say it. He didn’t have to. They all knew. They remembered the decrepit, burned-out shell they’d all had weird feelings about before their encounter with It. They remembered the mindfucks that waited inside. They remembered it all. *Fuck. They remembered it all.*

And Bill, lovely and stubborn and stupidly brave, to the point of recklessness, as always was out there alone.

They piled into the cars and made the trip to Neibolt as quickly as possible. Each vehicle was silent. The six of them were each lost in thought. Mike thought about the neverending labyrinth of tunnels below and how easily they’d been separated as kids and what that meant for them as adults. Isolation nearly swallowed Stanley whole as the mangled visage of the woman from the painting hovered over him. *You left me! You’re not my friends!* Ben recalled the helplessness he felt when Bev was taken, knowing there was nothing he could do. Bev felt the deadlights back on her and tried to suss out what she could do to keep them all out of them this time. A dull ache in Eddie’s right arm stirred up the imminent, practical dangers they were facking, past the stupid fucking clown. Richie, however, found his mind 3200 miles away from Maine, in a world where none of this existed and he and Eddie were allowed to just... be. Without Pennywise, their friends never would have fallen out of touch. Without Pennywise, they wouldn’t have had to come back here. 27 years worth of ‘should haves’ swirled in his brain. Rubbing at his fingers nervously, he hesitated on the fourth finger of his left hand. That was a *big* should have.

When the Losers made their way into the yard, they each screamed out for their friend, who was only ever so slightly ahead, by merit of the fact that he was on Silver because *of course*, he was.

Whipping back to his friends, Bill felt his fear rise to new heights. “No, n-n-no, you guys. No! I st-st-st-started all of this. It’s my fault

that y-y-you're all here." He stood stock-still on the step and turned to address them. Stan, from the back of the group, crossed his arms, already knowing where this lecture was going. He'd let it happen, he supposed, but if Bill could wrap it up, he'd really have appreciated it. Leave, I'm the one who dragged you all "This curse, this fucking thing that's inside you all, It started growing the day I m-m-m-made you go down to the b-barrens because all I cared about was finding G-g-g-g-Georgie." The rest of the Losers looked on sympathetically. They knew he carried that guilt with him for a long time, but they thought he'd have figured it out by then. "Now, I'm gonna go in there and, I don't know what's gonna happen but, I can't ask you to do this!"

The determination in his final sentence was all-too-familiar. The fact that he managed to get through it without even the hint of a stutter made it all the more important that they stay with him. Bill, when he was sure that he was right- Bill when he wasn't afraid, did even more dangerous things. His certainty caused him to rush in, guns blazing. His certainty, Bev feared, would be his undoing. "Well, we're not asking you either," she said, decision final, as she stepped forward, reaching out to grab his wrist, stilling him. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a loose fence post, just like the one she'd stabbed It with when they were kids. She bent down and picked it up, nodding at Bill, a silent *we've got your back*.

"It's too late for that," Stan said. If he sounded flippant or glib, he certainly hadn't meant it. But Bill should have known by then that, if they were already here, there was no going back. They were all in it.

"We didn't do it alone then, Bill, so we're not gonna do it alone now," Mike replied.

As though their old adage needed repeating, Ben chimed in, "Losers stick together."

The group went silent as it finally sunk in for Bill. He was grateful. There was no two ways about it. They were stronger together. "So, does somebody wanna say something?" Eddie prompted, breaking the silence.

“Richie said it best when we were here last,” Bill answered, a small smile playing out on his tired face.

Exchanging a knowing and slightly wary glance, Eddie and Stan answered with a synchronized “Oh no.” Knowing 13-year-old Richie as well as they had, there was a high probability that they were going to be there a while.

Thankfully, Richie seemed as thrown by the suggestion as everyone else. “I did?” he asked. When Bill nodded the affirmative, Richie shifted a little. He cleared his throat, trying to remember everything that wasn’t inherently Trashmouthy. “I don’t wanna die?” he said, knowing deep down that that wasn’t right.

Bill scrunched up his nose. “Not that,” he said, as though it was obvious.

Going back over that day, he came up with another nugget of teenage wisdom. “You’re lucky we’re not measuring dicks?” he suggested.

Laughing, despite himself, Bill shook his head. “No.” He knew it was inappropriate to have a random surge of affection for his friends before dragging them to their deaths, but it was so *Richie*. He’d missed them all so much. Even without knowing what he was missing, it was them. It was always them. His Losers.

Attempting seriously one more time, Richie stopped to think it over. Okay, so it wasn’t before they went into the house, but he had to admit, it was the only fitting thing. “Let’s kill this fucking clown?” He asked. Bill nodded encouragingly. He mustered up his courage and repeated himself, this time with as much gusto as he could manage. “Let’s kill this fucking clown.”

So, the Losers set off, making their way into the house on Neibolt street, finding it at least as decrepit as it had been 27 years earlier. The familiarity of it all was daunting, to say the least, like waking up to find yourself still in the middle of the nightmare you’d fought so hard to escape from.

A thick film of black oozed down the steps, smoldering at the edges. “Well, I love what he’s done with the place,” Richie sneered,

sounding a little more Thom Filicia than he'd meant to. Maybe. A little.

"Beep beep, Richie," Bev answered, as he'd snapped her out of her own head.

Leaning in close, Eddie snaked his arm around Richie's waist. "That beep beep?" he said, getting up on his tiptoes to kiss him on his unbandaged cheek. "Yeah, that was her gaydar," he laughed.

Richie laughed too, despite the fear bubbling in his throat. "Fuck you," he coughed. He gave Eddie a gentle shove but caught his hand before he could get too far away.

A secretive smile passed between them, but Eddie's melted away to the fondness as quickly as it came. "Fuck you right back," he replied. He tugged his hand up to his mouth and smiled, kissing it gently.

From behind them, Stan groaned. "Would you two stop?" he said. Richie whipped around to face him, his eyes a little wider than normal. He hadn't realized they weren't in the back of the group. Still, at least it was Stan. If anyone had to have seen that, he was glad it was Stan. He certainly didn't want to have to stop and have *that* conversation right then. Stan pushed past them gently to walk alongside Bill at the front. Richie and Eddie followed suit, leaving Mike, Bev, and Ben to take up the rear.

The group carried on through the house. In short order, they found themselves in the kitchen. Distracted by a reflection out of the corner of her vision, Bev ground to a halt, holding back the two men behind her.

"Hey, that's the basement, right?" Stan asked, gesturing to an open door in the corner. He knew the answer. Of course, he knew. No one had the chance to answer.

Quicker than any of them could react, Ben yelped, doubling over in agony. He clung to Bev and Mike, nearly toppling them to the floor. He clenched his stomach, raising his shirt and revealing a new set of letters across the same flesh that had been carved all those years before.

Beverly turned to face him and held him tight to her side as the man continued to cry out, subject to phantom attacks he couldn't verbalize. "Ben!" she yelled. Mike watched helplessly, eyes darting between the man on the floor in his arms and the men on the other side of the doorway. "Ben!" Bev whimpered, petting his head trying to calm him.

Stan tried to push back towards the trio on the floor. Unfortunately, that wasn't meant to happen. The house and it had other plans. "Ben!" he yelled, nearly getting his hand broken as the door slammed shut, effectively dividing the Losers. "Woah, no!" he screamed, throwing himself against the door.

Following suit, one by one the Losers in the kitchen tried to get back to their friends. "Hey! Open up!" Eddie commanded, intent on banging the door down.

"Ben!" Bill yelled, picking up a chair as he tried to wrench the door off its hinges.

Richie, however, found himself frozen in place, reacting to a banging behind them. "That can't be good, right?" he said, turning back to face the refrigerator, his hand dug into the back of Eddie's shirt and tugging him back.

Eyes wide, Eddie remembered the last time that crusty old refrigerator had taken to doing something of its own volition. Pennywise had been twisted inside and nearly succeeded in killing him. "Nope. Nuh-uh," he agreed, backing up against him, trying to push them out of its grasp. "Fridge is never good," he said, looking over at Bill and Stan, who had begun to react to the noises as well.

Seeing the door start to swing open, Bill yelled out, "Rich, m-m-m-move," and Eddie shoved the pair of them back to the corner with all his might. "Move!"

Bang!

The door swung open and, from within, a note fluttered out to the floor in front of Richie and Eddie. "What the fuck?" Richie held Eddie tightly to his chest, ready to push him out of the way at a

moment's notice. For all he could imagine, the paper might as well have been a bomb. Nothing was as it seemed when It was involved.

Cautiously, Stan crossed to the paper and picked it up, holding it delicately between his thumb and forefinger, as though afraid it might bite him. "Dear Losers," he read quietly. His eyes skimmed the next line and his heart nearly stopped. Eyes wide, he read the familiar words in his own handwriting aloud to his friends, "I know what this must seem like, but this isn't a suicide note." Bill took a timid step toward him before snatching the paper from his hands and crumpling it up to toss it aside. Still, Stan continued, knowing the words he'd left unsent anyway. "You're probably wondering why-"

Pitch black.

Nothing.

A low-frequency buzz.

"Stan!" Bill yelled, searching for his friend in the dark. Eddie's trembling hands clung to Richie's arms, nails surely digging crescent moons into his wrists. He was not getting pulled away. They were staying together no matter what. Likewise, Richie's hands stayed twisted in Eddie's jacket. Bill, however, had no such luck in making contact with their friend. "Stanley!"

The lights came back and it was suddenly crystal clear as to why Bill hadn't reached Stanley.

On the floor, surrounded by a too-large, too-red puddle of what looked to be his own blood, Stanley lay with his stitches ripped open, new cuts to either side. Razor blades dotted the floor like confetti. "I'm sorry, guys, I-" he whimpered. His skin was pale. His eyes were unfocused. Richie and Bill rushed to either side of him.

"Woah, hey, hey, you're okay," Richie said, reaching out to take one blood-stained hand in his own. "You're stitched up, remember. This isn't real." His throat, however, constricted with very, very real tears.

Looking up at his friends, Stan tried to apologize. "I'm s-s-s-"

Allowing a wet laugh to fall from his lips, Bill wiped at his eyes with

the back of his hand. "H-h-h-hey, that's my l-line," he said, trying to distract him.

Head lolling toward the side Bill's voice was coming from, he still tried to get out the words he needed to say. "I'm sorry, Billy. Please don't be mad," he whimpered.

"Why would I be m-m-mad?" Bill asked, bolting to his feet. He sounded too much like Georgie. Too much like before. He had to figure out a way to make it stop.

Calmly, Richie continued to rub at Stan's hand. "Nobody's mad, Staniel," he assured. He took a breath, then stood himself, trying to get them moving. "Come on, we gotta get you up and out of here." He tried to lift him, but found only dead weight, even though Stan seemed to struggle with all his might to get up.

From the corner, Eddie finally managed to pipe up, shaking the clouds from his thoughts. "That's... Richie, that's real blood," he said, as the pool began to darken and coagulate. "That's not a trick," he moved to the side opposite Richie and rubbed his friend's chest comfortingly. He watched awareness blink in and out of his eyes. "Stan, hold on, okay," he said, voice shaking. "You must've popped your stitches. I can fix it. I can-"

Bill shook his head, all fondness dashed from his eyes. "Eddie, back up." Eddie looked up at him, stunned. "Believing m-m-makes it r-r-real. This isn't r-r-r-real. It's playing a trick on us."

"No, man, he's hurt," Richie said, imploring Bill to look at him. "He's hurt and we have to make it stop." When he got no response at all, Richie scoffed and leaned back over Stan, saying something to Eddie Bill couldn't understand.

From the basement steps, a teenage Stan stepped out, wounds identical to his adult counterpart. "I didn't want to do this again. I didn't want It to have the chance to get me." He moved toward him, an ungodly amount of blood pouring from his wrists. "Why did you let It get me, Bill?"

Subconsciously, Bill must have heard Eddie say "Richie, get me

something to wrap his arms with. We have to stop the bleeding.” But he certainly didn’t acknowledge it any more than Richie and Eddie acknowledged the 12-year-old specter advancing on Bill.

“You let It get me,” he spat, “the same way you let It get Georgie.”

Retreating from the boy was the only thing he could think to do. “I-I-I didn’t...” He looked down at the scene on the floor and nearly choked on his tears. “You w-w-w-weren’t...”

Eddie’s voice, though muffled, rang through his ears. “This is too much blood. It’s too much. Bill, give me your flannel. I can-”

He paid him no mind. He was too distracted by the ire and venom being spewed his way. *You’re not my friends!* Still, he wasn’t hysterical. He was calm and calculated and direct. “I trusted you, Bill,” he said, the word shooting directly through him. “I trusted you. We all did.” He gestured around at the door and at the men on the floor beside him. “We came back because Mike said so but we thought we’d be okay with you at the helm but you dragged us down here again and we’re all gonna die because you can’t face it.” He stopped, a dry laugh piercing the staticky hum in Bill’s head. “I thought I was the weak one. It’s *you*,” he said flatly. “We’re all going to die because of you.”

“That’s enough, Stan,” Bill whimpered as he turned from the pint-sized version to the fully grown one. “Come on, man. Y-y-you gotta get up now.”

In the blink of an eye, the teenage stan was gone. All around the four Losers, the blood flooding the kitchen began to vibrate like a puddle in a speaker system commercial. The three conscious men looked at it, momentarily terrified of what was to come, Bill and Eddie, remembering the interior of Bev’s bathroom on that hot summer day. One by one, the outermost droplets began to crawl away on their own. The puddle diminished, sure, but in its place grew hundreds upon thousands of vicious spiders. Eddie let out a scream and jumped away from the mess.

Richie and Bill both grabbed at whatever they could find, a bottle and a newspaper respectively. “You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me,”

Richie shouted. His complaints were useless, however. Every now and then, a few of the spiders would morph together and form a bigger, more terrifying version, with pincers and gnashing teeth. "Again with the fucking spiders, dude?" he snapped, as though it was Stanley's fault.

Frantically, Bill swatted over and over until he realized that what he'd done had been for naught. The bodies of the injured spiders skittered together over Stanley's arms and up through his hair until they formed one giant spider, nearly twice the size of his head. The legs bore jagged, stiletto-like spikes. The body was covered with barbed hairs. The mouth was filled with thousands of jagged, razor-sharp teeth. The eyes, all of them, were set on Richie.

Darting away from the arachnid, Bill scrambled for something more useful. He swiftly broke the chair he'd used earlier to try to lift the hinges and swung the leg at the creature, sending it skittering away from where it was hissing threateningly at a petrified Richie.

In the moment of calm, Richie looked beside him to his partner. "Eddie, are you okay?"

"I-" Eddie started, voice cutting out as he stared at a point just above Richie's head.

Slowly following his gaze, Richie looked up at the rafters. He took a deep breath and nodded. *Of course.* "Oh, *there* it is," he said casually.

The room broke out into pandemonium. The larger-than-life monstrosity dropped directly on Richie's face, knocking his glasses to the floor. "Richie!" Bill shrieked, darting to his side and trying to pry it from his friend. He kicked at his still unconscious friend's leg desperately. "Stan, get up, now!" he begged.

Panicking, Richie flailed, causing the spidery legs to clamp down harder. "Get it off me!" he screamed. *Stanley, we're not afraid of fucking spiders. I stand corrected.* He clawed at the creature, trying to thrash it off of his face. *I stand corrected.* If he had thought it would help, he'd have run his own head against the wall. *I stand corrected.* Anything to get that fucking thing off of him. *I stand corrected.*

Eddie focused on Richie's discarded glasses on the floor. He couldn't bring himself to look at the struggle. He had just watched him get stabbed. He couldn't watch. He *couldn't*... "I wanna go home. I wanna go home. I don't wanna be here. Rich, I wanna go home. Richie, I wanna go home," he repeated like a prayer.

Just out of reach, Bill noticed an old, rusty knife on the floor. He stretched, trying to grab it without letting the attacker any closer to Richie. "Eddie, the knife!" he called, desperately. "Get the fucking knife, man," he shouted, so loudly he thought his throat might bleed.

"Knife," Eddie repeated, dazed. *Babe, I just got stabbed. I think-* "Fuck," he hissed. This wasn't going to work. He had to snap out of it. "Right. Coming," he said, breaking out of his stupor and swiping the blade from the floor. He reached up and, with all of his pent up anger, brought the knife slamming down into the spider. In a moment of stunned calm, the blood floated upward in droplets. As he and Bill stared, transfixed, the thing jumped up and scampered off. "Shit," he hissed, startled by the movement. "Rich," he whispered, watching his partner hyperventilate and shake, having succumbed to the sheer panic and adrenaline of the moment.

As the rest of the losers climbed in the kitchen window, Bev slid in at Richie's head, shirking off her jacket and rolling it up to go under Richie's head which she pulled into her lap. Ben and Mike clung to the doorframe, taking in the scene before them, stunned. Bill took the intrusion as his moment to round on Eddie. "What the fuck, man? What t-t-t-took you so long?" He shouted, grabbing him by the collar of his jacket and pressing him back against the cabinets. "Did you w-w-w-want It to get Richie t-t-too?" Eddie looked up at his friend, stunned. He had never seen Bill like this. "It got Georgie, It got the kid, It almost got Stan. I-i-is that what you want? Do you want R-r-r-richie to die? He could have d-d-died!" He nearly threw himself at Eddie, but found himself restrained.

"Bill," came Mike's even, calm voice from behind him. "Bill, that's enough, man," he said. His strong arms closed tightly around Bill and he didn't even think to struggle. He nearly melted against him.

In the distance, Eddie tried to focus instead on Richie. He hadn't died. He had to be okay. He had to be. Ben was next to Stan, shaking

him, trying to rouse him. Bev was speaking kindly to a still panicked Richie. "I can't see! Glasses. Where are-"

"Here, honey," she said, retrieving them before wiping them off on her tank top then sliding them down onto his face. "They're right here."

Ben looked over at him, sinking back on his heels as Stan started to stir. "You okay?" he asked.

"No," Richie squawked. Realizing how that sounded, he immediately took it back. "Yes?" But Richie wasn't a liar and *what fucking part of this was even slightly okay?* "Fuck, man! I don't know!"

"I was scared, Bill. It was-" Eddie cut himself off, focusing back on Bill, red-faced and seething. "Please, don't be mad, Bill. I was just scared."

Bill stumbled back into Mike's chest. He could see in Eddie's face that he'd taken it too far. Way too far. They were all scared. Bill was scared. But that didn't mean that he had any right to make it worse for anyone else. Quietly, he added, "That's what It w-w-wants. Don't give it to It." It wasn't an apology, but Eddie could see in the immediate change in his demeanor as he walked away, Mike never once letting go of him, that he was sorry.

Of course, Eddie understood. If only Bill could, too. He sighed. *Soon, Bill. Soon, you'll get why I was so scared.* He knelt between Richie and Stan, placing a gentle hand on Richie's thigh. "Hey. Are you alright?" Richie's breathing was still fast and ragged. Eddie reached into his pocket and pulled out his old inhaler. "Want a hit?" he offered. Richie, not prepared for that, gave a shocked laugh and smacked Eddie on the side. "Not what I meant, but I'll take that one," Hearing a groan from beside him, he looked down to see Stan returning, once more, to the land of the living. "Welcome back, Stan the Man," he said, squeezing his hand and pulling it into his lap. "You two are exhausting," he laughed a little, rising to his feet. He looked over at Richie. "Can you stand?" He nodded a little and sat up, testing the waters. Yeah, he could stand. Eddie reached a hand to him and pulled him up. "Can you?" he asked Stan. Stan didn't seem so sure, so Ben helped get him to his feet. Before long, they were

ready to go.

“Let’s get this over with,” Richie said, leaning on Eddie’s shoulder for support.

The Lucky Seven headed down the stairs to the basement. About midway down, Ben took a look around and focused on the old well. “Lot of memories,” he said, pounding his fist on the railing three times. “None of them good.” Moving to the edge of the old stone ring, they tossed the old rope ladder down and headed into the darkness of the sewers.

Notes for the Chapter:

Again, what happened with Bill at the Carnival and what happened with Mike, Bev, and Ben all occurred as in canon. Nothing different there.

6. Before I Knew How Much I Had To Lose

Summary for the Chapter:

Rituals, Pennywise visions, and a flashback.

Notes for the Chapter:

Shit's getting real now, folks.

Warning: Movie typical horror. Slurs. Homophobia, internalized and very literal.

The tunnels were deep and dark and dank. Each one led to another, more disgusting than the one before. The Losers trudged along, trying not to be too disgusted by it.

Bill and Mike, as usual, were at the front of the group. Bev was just a few steps behind, her flashlight doing the majority of the work since Mike, for some reason, had decided that he was going to shine his directly under the surface of the water. Ben walked behind her, alongside Stan. The men shared hushed battle plans to calm themselves, knowing as soon as It showed itself, any plan was for naught. Richie and Eddie lagged behind.

As the front of the group started to turn off into the next stretch, Richie reached out his hand for Eddie and gave him a tug. "Babe, stop," he whispered, letting the group spread out ahead of them.

Worried, Eddie turned to him, stopping immediately. "What's up, Richie?" he asked, voice pitching upward.

He needn't have worried, though. Far from it.

Richie pulled Eddie's arms tightly around him and rested his own hands on the highest point of Eddie's neck. He brought their lips together desperately, secretly. Eddie felt his entire body come to life. He breathed Richie in, the most functional inhaler he'd ever used. Stepping back, albeit reluctantly, Richie smiled softly. "Okay, we can go," he said, not making any motion to do so.

"What was that for?" Eddie asked. He reached his hands forward and toyed with Richie's unbuttoned patterned shirt, trying to avoid the blood that dotted it.

Richie shrugged, lacing their fingers together. "I'm just..." he tilted his head to the side and watched Eddie carefully. How was he supposed to say that he was regretting ever having said that they should hide the fact that they were together? How was he supposed to say that, especially since it had turned out that none of it mattered, that he really would rather have been able to hold his partner, to kiss him, to have him openly by his side. Eventually, he settled on, "I just needed that. I love you. You've spoiled me. I'm not used to having to do difficult things without you."

Shaking his head, Eddie's mouth twitched slightly into a subtle smile. A thousand *told-ya-so's* went unsaid on his lips. "I'm right here. I've been right here the whole time," he reminded, unwaveringly patient with Richie's borderline neurotic reactions to Derry.

"I mean..." he started, looking up at the dripping ceiling as he searched for the words. Eventually, he rolled his eyes and sighed, exaggeratedly. "You know what I mean."

With a smile and a gentle nod, Eddie agreed. "Yeah." Of course, he knew. There was no one on the Face of the planet who spoke Richie-ese with such practiced fluency as Eddie. "So, are we officially done with hiding it, then?" Richie nodded, catching him in another kiss. "I love you."

Giving himself permission to spend one more moment in their bubble of calm. "I love you, Eds," he said, almost in an exhale. He pressed his face into his boyfriend's hair as Eddie nestled into the crook of his neck. When he managed to feel, finally, like his feet were back under him where they belonged, saturated in greywater though they were, "Let's catch up to them," he said.

"Okay," Eddie sighed, catapulting himself back to reality. Far too quickly, they caught up with the group and were maneuvering through cavernous sewers that shouldn't have felt familiar. No one in their right mind should be experiencing a sense of *déjà vu* in a

sewer.

Still, as their footsteps approached, Stan turned back to them, on high alert. He calmed a little, realizing quickly that it was just his friends. He gave them a glance, making sure they were both unharmed. His gaze lingered on their entwined fingers. He smiled. *Finally* . At least, if nothing else, the pair of them still had each other. So much had changed for them. They may not have been, as Ben had dubbed them, Lucky seven. All in all, though, they could consider the bond between them a big win. Any other seven middle school friends coming back together at 40 would probably not have fallen back into their rapport so easily. It was like no time had passed at all.

Richie rolled his eyes, smiling himself. "Shut up, Stanne of Green Gables," he grumbled.

"I literally haven't said a word," Stan laughed.

Draping his free arm around his friend's shoulder, walking between his two favorite men, he pulled him in close, resting his head against his. "I can hear you thinking," he said, bringing their heads together with a thunk.

"That's not..." he said, stumbling for words. When Richie gave him a look that so clearly said *don't try to argue with me when you know I'm right*, he didn't. Instead, he settled on a weak, "Focus on your own thoughts, Rich. If you have any, that is," cuffing him on the back of the head.

The trio behind laughed amongst themselves, momentarily distracted from what they were about to face. *Just another day in Derry...*

And it was, Richie supposed, because just as they reached their destination Bev turned back to investigate a sound. She'd no sooner dismissed it as a trick of her tired, frazzled mind than she found herself struggling against a too-tall, too-naked old woman.

Remembering Stan's description of the way the woman from the painting in his father's office had traumatized him, Richie asked quickly, "That your pin-up girl, Stan?"

“Fuck off,” he said, bracing himself to launch back for Bev.

The vision’s grating voice shot through the cavern. “Time to sink!” she shouted, dragging the woman under the water. Under and under. Hadn’t they just been standing?

The men jumped off the island. “Bev!” they cried out, diving after her. One after one, they all splashed into the water and after their friend.

All, that is, except one.

The weight of everything they’d done came crashing down around Eddie. The worst part was that Richie had been in grave danger and he hadn’t been able to do anything about it. His best friend, the love of his fucking life, had been on the brink of death and he froze. Sure, he moved, but it was almost too late. It was almost too late. He had just stood there. He was going to let Richie die because he was afraid. He couldn’t help anyone. Watching as the ripples from their effort stilled and the bubbles of their breath slowed to nothing, he found himself whimpering on the shore. “Guys! Guys, come on!” he called out weakly. “Don’t leave me here alone!” Another moment of nothing. “Come on, guys!” He dug his hands into the wreckage and leaned forward, tears flowing unbidden from his eyes. “Richie, please...” he wept, realizing he’d done it again.

The losers popped back to the surface, Bev safely in Ben’s arms. Eddie began to ease, sobbing into his hands, relieved.

Standing in the water, realizing the only visible way out of the room they were in was back through the tunnel they’d come, Richie stood, staring at the island in the middle. “Mike, where do we go from here?” he asked.

The group moved back together. Eddie clung desperately to Richie, hands dug into his shirt under his jacket. Mike pulled Bill toward a raised platform in the middle of the island. Ben and Stan stood back, each with an arm around Bev, eyeing Mike warily.

There they were, staring face down at a hatch with a symbol, not unlike the one on the leather vase Mike had shown them. *Maybe it’s*

just a button we have to hit every 108 minutes or something... Richie snorted a little laugh at himself. "We have to go back," he whispered, leaning into Eddie's personal space. None of the Losers appeared to notice, so Richie frowned. He brought his hand to rest on the Small of Eddie's back, then looked up at Bev, who stood with her arms crossed, feet squared off as she stood between Stan and Ben. Stan had been staring at the hatch, but looked up questioningly at Bill. Bill didn't appear to have looked away from Mike since they reached the door.

Mike, however, was transfixed on the symbol etched in the hatch. He knelt and traced his fingertips over the design cautiously. "In the depth is where It crept. In the beneath they find relief," he repeated, muttering to himself. Over and over, the words slipped from his lips, a quiet mantra to the Shokopiwah. He had scoured the words for years, but could never pinpoint the significance. It had to be that. It *had* to.

"Is he okay?" Ben asked, as the three of them moved closer to Richie and Eddie.

Richie leaned into Ben and whispered, "I think at this point, that's a relative question." Stan huffed out a laugh.

From above them, Bill asked Mike "What's on the other side?"

"I don't know," he answered. Then, as though realizing something, he looked directly at Stan. "No one does."

"You've gotta be shitting me," he balked, pretending that hadn't been a direct hit for him. When the rest of the group looked at him, too, he turned away from them, throwing his hands in the air. "Give me a break," he whined.

Mike sniffed in long, preparing himself for whatever lay beneath. He pried the hatch open and...

Nothing.

Just a long, dark drop again, not unlike the one from the basement on Neibolt. He nodded. Of course, it wouldn't be that easy. "Alright,"

he said, looking up at the others as he dropped into the hole. "See ya down there," he said, starting his descent.

Bill moved in behind, heading down after him. "St-stay together," he called up to his friends. Bev moved in next, Ben giving her a hand over the lip of the hatch. Their progress was stopped quickly, though.

"Guys, I can't do it," Eddie piped up quickly. Feeling the familiar constriction in his chest as he started to wheeze, panic stirring within him. He reached into his pocket and retrieved the inhaler. He traced his fingers along it. The ease with which the small object fit back into his habits startled him. Pressing the aspirator to his lips, he took a hit.

The noise jarred Richie to turn back and face him square on. "Woah, what?" He could hear steps stilling behind him, but didn't bother to investigate what they were seeing.

All Richie could see was Eddie, Eddie then and Eddie from all those years before, clinging to his inhaler and full of dread, backing away.

"I was gonna let..." Eddie's voice seemed to startle him. he dropped his volume so that only Richie could hear. "I was gonna let you die." He looked up at his partner, hands shaking. He didn't know what he would have done if he had. It had been so close and he never would have forgiven himself. Eyes flitting to the ground, he spoke again. "I just fucking froze up. You let me go down there with you," he said, gesturing toward the hatch, a thousand worst-case scenarios going through his head wrenching his chest up again, "I'm gonna get us all killed." He rattled out those last few words before taking a big puff from his inhaler, cursing himself for falling back on his old lifeline so easily.

Stan felt the oncoming interaction in his gut and turned back to Ben and Bev, who were perched at the edge of the hatch preparing to drop in, but waiting for them. "Guys, why don't you go ahead? We've got him. Stay with Bill and Mike."

Nodding, Ben placed a strong, steady hand on the small of Bev's back. She shoved his hand away and swung her legs back out, facing

them. "No," she said plainly, securing herself in a nonverbal standoff with Stan. He was always the one person who gave her the most competition in wordless stubbornness. Inappropriate though the thought was at the time, Bev was grateful that that hadn't changed and, even further to the front of her mind, was that she was so relieved that the vision from the deadlights had been wrong. She couldn't imagine being down here without Stan. As they stared, carrying out their near-telepathic argument, Eddie and Richie devolved into a fast and loud one of their own, leaving poor Ben caught; the calm in the eye of the hurricane.

"Hey. Gimme that," Richie snapped, reaching for the inhaler, snaking one long arm under Eddie's and holding him close. Eddie shoved it up his sleeve and made a demonstrative wave to say *it's gone, what do you mean?* "What the fuck?" He groaned, sticking his hand up the sleeve after him, only to find it clenched in Eddie's fist. "You haven't used an inhaler in 27 fucking years." He dug his fingers in, trying to pry the plastic from his boyfriend's hand. "Gimme..."

Eddie yelped. "Hey!"

"Gimme that-"

"Let go!" he whined, trying to wrench his hand away.

With practiced dexterity, he captured the smaller man in much the same fashion he would walking him backwards to the bed or to cajole him into dancing with him, no matter how much he protested. "Babe, let go," he coaxed, leaning in close, he switched into the assertive, yet low and sweet voice he'd so often used through the years to calm Eddie but could never pinpoint the origin. It was this. It was always this. Eddie would start to have an anxiety attack and, going cold turkey off all of his meds, he'd find himself adrift with no life raft. One afternoon, while at the library with Mike, Stan, and Ben while Eddie was once again confined strictly to his room, Richie had stumbled upon an article about the responses of the sympathetic nervous system to compression, most efficiently hugging. He hadn't thought anything of it, really, until he was laying in Eddie's bed that night and the smaller teen started to spiral over a simple question about the length of his punishment. The first thing that came to his mind was the article. As Eddie gasped for breath and sobbed, Richie

pulled his best friend tightly against his chest and squeezed him hard.
“I swear-”

Eddie struggled against his grasp, and spoke right over top of him.
“Richie, stop. Just let me-”

“ *You’re* not going to die.”

“Let me get one-”

“ *I’m* not going to die.”

“More hit off of it.”

“ *They’re* not going to die.”

“I’m gonna have an asthma attack-”

“You don’t even fucking have asthma-”

“And pass out.”

“You little turd.”

“Just let me get-”

Accenting the end of his speech and his insistence that he’d won, Richie dug into his pocket and shone his flashlight into Eddie’s eyes. “Richie! What the fuck?” he winced, throwing his hands up to shield his vision. Triumphant, the taller man grabbed the aspirator while Eddie was attempting to puff out of midair and shoved it down into his back pocket.

Grabbing Eddie’s hands as he started to try to get the item back in his hands, Richie dropped his voice low, lacing their fingers together. “Stop. Listen to me. You had a moment. Fine.” Eddie looked up at him sadly. It was more than a ‘moment’ to him. How could Richie not see that? It was a liability. It was a risk Eddie wasn’t willing to take again. “Did you or did you not get yourself out of that corner and to the knife?” Richie asked.

Surprisingly, to the three onlookers, the action did seem to calm

Eddie. There was no argument. Simply a deep breath, followed by a short, quiet, "I did."

"Did you or did you not do the same fucking thing with Bowers earlier tonight when my life was on the line?" he asked, sliding his hands up Eddie's arms to rest on his solid shoulders.

"I did," he said.

A sly smile crossed his lips, knowing it was working. "Who killed a psychotic clown before he left junior high?"

Standing a little straighter, Eddie nodded proudly. "Me." As his mind began to fill in but *it wasn't just you*, it immediately countered with *you couldn't have done it without them and they can't do this without you*.

From behind, Stan called out, "And who's been living with this whackjob for 27 years making him braver and more patient than any of us?"

Eddie breathed out a short laugh, already having been convinced. "...Also me," he said, taking a step toward Richie, who was rolling his eyes exaggeratedly. He closed his eyes and said quietly, shaking his head. "I love you."

As his expression softened, Richie pulled Eddie into a tight hug. "I love you, too." He kissed his temple quickly, then brought his hand up to rest on Eddie's cheek, thumbing his jaw tenderly. "You're braver than you think."

"Alright. Thanks," he said, sniffing the last of his worries back down where they belonged. He melted back into the embrace, resting his cheek on his partner's chest. "Thanks, Richie."

Slow footsteps crunched closer to the couple, reminding them again that they weren't alone. Bev handed the fence post to Eddie with a sad smile. "Here. Take this," she folded the metal into his fist, then patted it shut. "It kills monsters." Her voice was full of the same hopeful surety that you'd expect from a child.

"Does it?" he asked skeptically.

“Yeah,” she said with a broad smile that didn’t quite make it all the way to her eyes. “If you believe it does.”

Eddie took a deep breath and took a step back, eyes flitting over the rest of them. With a nod, Ben began his descent into the tunnels below. “Thanks, Bev,” he said, walking her over.

“You’re welcome,” she said, eyes flicking between Richie and Eddie quickly before resting her hand on Eddie’s cheek, playfully adding a quiet, “babe.” She turned quickly and darted after Ben.

Eyeing the panicked reaction of his two friends, Stan circled behind them and pushed them toward the hatch. “Oh, come on, it’s fine,” he assured, ignoring the wide-eyed, open-mouthed fear all over Richie and the bemused, startled smile on Eddie’s. “You two are a fucking mess, you know that?” he said, continuing to chastise them quietly the whole way down, careful not to let his voice echo.

When they reached the bottom, it was only a short while before they reached the section of the cavern that must have been where they were meant to do the ritual. What looked like an outstretched hand was situated in the middle of the open space and Mike gestured that they should all follow behind.

He knelt, pulling the vase from his rucksack and placing it in the center and pulling out a pack of matches as well. “It can only be attacked in Its true form. The ritual will show us that,” he said, looking up at his friends, who had all circled around him.

“And what is Its true form?” Stan asked, folding his arms over his chest and looking at Richie, to his left. To his right, even Bill seemed hesitant.

Smiling, and looking directly across at Ben, Richie said, “I hope it’s a puppy.” He was only half sarcastic. He remembered belief being a huge part of their victory the first time. He thought, maybe...

“Yeah, more likely a fucking dingo,” Ben scoffed back.

Eddie laughed, looking around at them shocked. “Is that it? Is Richie Its true form? That might be easier to beat.” He gave his partner a

playful shove, before leaning against him, staying there.

“He said dingo, not ding-bat,” Bev replied, sticking her tongue out at him.

Molly Ringwald gets off a good one. He couldn’t help but laugh, before realizing that this wasn’t supposed to feel normal. Still, he offered a good-natured, “Hey, fuck you guys.” He phoned in his outrage, stepping closer to Eddie and draping his arm around his shoulders lazily.

Unphased by their teasing, Mike carried on. “It’s light. Light that must be snuffed out by darkness.”

Despite Bill’s dismayed silence, Stan spat out a seethingly sarcastic, “That sounds easy enough.” Even Richie seemed surprised by the sharpness in his tone. *That’s not saying much*, he heard Stan from 27 years before say, a little more good-natured, but still as snide and unhappy about being dragged into these things.

“It’s time for the artifacts,” he said, as casually as Richie did when prompting Eddie that it was time to add the garlic to their dinner for the night. Before they’d even gotten to him, he worked on biting back the urge to spend the rest of forever as the Swedish Chef.

Luckily, Bill spoke up first, giving Richie more time to work on his restraint. Pulling an age yellowed folded piece of paper from his back pocket, he took a deep breath. “This is, uh, this is the b-boat I built with G-g-g-Georgie.” The Losers watched as he tossed it inside. The flames hissed angrily as they engulfed his item. Bill had expected to feel something as the item went up. A longing, a pang, guilt, regret, anything. It just felt empty.

The group looked around at each other, silently drawing straws. Growing tired of waiting, Eddie dug into his back pocket and took a deep breath. “My inhaler,” he said, looking down at the item in his fist before taking a long hit from it.

Richie knocked his hip against Eddie’s. “Come on, Eds,” he prompted, taking the smaller man’s hand in his. Together, they tossed the item forward and, surprisingly, into the vessel.

Immediately to Eddie's left, Bev reached into her pocket and pulled out what looked like an old, folded up postcard. *Your hair is winter fire, January embers. My heart burns there, too.* "Something I wish I had held on to," she said, missing the sad smile on Ben's face entirely.

Clearing his throat and speaking immediately after her, Ben opened his wallet and held a folded piece of paper from inside. "This is a page from my yearbook that only one person signed." He stumbled over the words, running his thumb across the worn, tattered edge and unfolded it, revealing the age smeared ink on the inside to himself and himself alone. "I probably should have forgotten it, but I couldn't because I kept it in my wallet," he cast a glance to his right, eyeing a pensive Bev carefully, praying for the light of recognition, "for 27 years."

"This is a token from the Capitol Theatre," Richie said, turning the small coin over in his hand before tossing it into the fire.

Eddie paused, looking over at him. "Do you have any idea how long that's gonna take to burn?" he asked.

Eyes wide in outrage, Richie squawked, gesturing to the flames. "You put an inhaler in! Yours is metal, too." He thought about it some more, wrapping Eddie a little tighter in his arms. "Besides, yours is gonna explode, asshole."

"Shut up, Richie," he countered deftly.

"Make me," he challenged, scrunching his nose up. Eddie pulled back, earning a mock gasp. "Fuck you."

Fondly, Eddie shook his head, answering with a sharp, "Fuck you ."

"Guys, come on," Ben groaned.

Quietly, Richie continued, unwilling to drop the bit. "Plus, the toxic fumes from the plastic?"

Stan ignored them and started his own explanation. "An essay I wrote for Hebrew School about watching and seeing and, ultimately, my decision to be more actively involved in my own life." He tossed

the old, ratty loose leaf into the fire and watched it go up.

Finally, Mike proffered his item. A small piece of white granite covered in something red. “Look closely, Bev. Do you see it?” he asked. So it was blood. “It’s where you hit Bowers.”

She loosed a puff of air, astonished at how clear the memory was. “Rock fight,” she said, ignoring Richie’s voice screaming the same words in the back of her head, echoing from 27 years prior.

A gentle smile warmed his features as Mike nodded. “The day these bonds were forged.” Now, the phrase made sense. He still sounded like a character from some medieval fantasy series to Eddie, but at least now he could acknowledge that the whole ritual felt a little bit like a plot point that Richie would bitch about being contrived if it was a movie.

“That’s not gonna burn either,” Richie teased, earning himself a silent glare from Mike as he dropped the final item. It was possibly the loudest, most hearty *Beep Beep*, *Richie* of his life.

“Grab hands,” he prompted and stepped back to join his friends. Quickly, the Losers obliged. Richie reached out for Eddie and Stan. Bev connected to Ben and Eddie immediately. Bill’s hands found Stan’s and Mike’s readily. Mike closed the circle, clasping his own free hand with Ben’s. Still the last two in. “The Ritual of Chüd is a battle of wills. The first step was our reunion. The second, the gathering of tokens. This is the third, and final, step.”

The group stood in reverent silence for a moment staring into the center of their circle, waiting for something, *anything* to happen. Whatever happened, they’d figure it out, but *nothing*... They couldn’t fight *nothing*.

As though prompted, the flames in the jar snuffed themselves out. “What the fuck?” Richie gasped.

A low rumble echoed through the cavern and the upper portion began to undulate. Slowly, a soft glow beamed from above them. Mike looked up immediately. Bill wasn’t far behind. They watched as the walls seemed to grow teeth. The glow turned into a pinpoint

light, then split into three. “The fuck is that?” Bill shouted, causing the rest of the Losers to look up as well.

“Don’t look at them!” Mike yelled, voice strong and commanding.

Eddie’s eyes snapped straight to his friend, startled. He was still wary of the whole deal, but he was going to take Mike’s word as gospel here. He was the one who had spent the last twenty-odd years researching and preparing while everyone else had forgotten.

“Are those the deadlights?” Richie asked, tightening his grip on Eddie’s hand.

One by one, the group looked at each other, some people lingering a little longer on others than the rest, before squeezing them shut. “Don’t look!” The group nodded, as Mike clarified. “Repeat the phrase ‘Turn light into dark!’” There was a moment of tense silence before Mike shouted desperately, “Say it!”

Eddie was the first to give in, “Turn light into dark,” he said, voice unsure. The next time, Bev and Stan had joined. “Turn light into dark.” Richie, Ben and Bill added themselves to the chant, each more skeptical than the last. “Turn light into dark.”

Speeding through each repetition, Richie felt his heartbeat begin to pound faster and faster. “Turn light into dark.” He didn’t like not being able to watch whatever was going on. “Mike, what’s happening, man?” he asked. Their chorus continued, each time a little more desperate. Mike began to chant in the tongue of the Shokopiwah and the lights started their rapid descent.

“Keep chanting!” Mike yelled dismissively. “Turn light into dark.” They could feel the warmth of the lights on their faces as they made their way to the ground. Their even chants began to grow into desperate cries. Bev’s tears were evident, even though no one could see her. Bill’s stammer disappeared once more, uncertainty replaced by drive. Each repetition pitched Stan’s voice higher. Ben shouted until his voice was raw. When the warmth finally hit their legs, Mike reached around behind him for the lid to the vase and slammed it down tightly, his words ceasing immediately.

The rest of the losers followed suit rapidly, falling off and opening their eyes as soon as they registered that Mike's voice had stopped. "Is it working? Did we do it?" Eddie asked frantically.

Before anyone could have answered, there was the telltale low groan of a latex balloon rubbing against a stationary object. *Fucking balloons.* "Is this part of it?" Bev asked, staring as the red balloon began to pour over the sides of the vessel.

Richie's attention flicked between the container and his friends. "Mike, is this supposed to be happening?" he asked, trying to decide whether the concept of this being wrong was more or less terrifying than the alternative.

"Keep chanting, keep chanting!" Mike urged as he struggled to keep it contained.

Thrown by the sudden resurgence, Eddie whelped a confused "What?" He looked between his friends for someone, anyone, to start making sense.

Heeding Mike's insistence, Richie gave out a wary "Turn light into dark." He repeated it twice before other Losers began to lend their voices.

"Turn light into dark-" Bill said. If his voice seemed uncertain, his expression was downright lost. As the balloon enlarged, it began to rapidly overtake the container. Before long, it did. "Woah!" He jumped back just in time to save himself, Stan and Richie from being knocked out of the stoney fingers of It's lair.

Each Loser found their view of the others obscured. "Eddie!" Richie cried out, attempting to make a reach for him. He was pinned. There was no getting to him. Again. He could only hope that, like at the Jade, others were near enough that, should anything happen, he wasn't alone. "Eds!" he called again, hoping for a response.

"Shit!" Ben hissed as the balloon encroached upon him. He scrambled out from its reach as it began to spill out of the center of the room one more time. It was going to blow. Reaching up and grabbing whomever he could by the back of the shirt, evidently Bev

and Eddie, he pulled them back just in time.

BOOM!

The sound waves from the detonation were palpable. Stalactites dropped like bombs. The ground shook.

Eddie stumbled, trying to regain his equilibrium. "What the fuck?" he yelled. Ben's arms curled protectively around Bev, shielding her from debris.

"Guys, where are you?" Richie yelled into the dark, rising and helping Bill to his feet where they'd been thrown into Stan by the explosion.

Even if his stammer hadn't returned the moment the intrinsic fear had, the shock would have certainly triggered it for Bill. "I-I-I can't hear shit," he yelled, too close and too loud for Richie. He rubbed at his ear, trying to cease the ringing. He stared up at his friend, thoroughly shaken. "I c-c-can't hear anything!"

Throwing his arm around his friend's middle, he heaved them both off in search of the rest. "It's okay, I've got you."

"We're here, Billy," Stan said, coming around to his other side and holding tight to him, trying desperately to ignore the new scrapes up his forearms from where he braced himself against the fall.

"Wait, where's Mike?" Eddie called out, realizing he was the only voice he hadn't heard or face he couldn't see.

In an attempt to assess the state of them, Richie voiced a cautious, "Is everybody okay?"

The six accounted for came together, and moved to embrace one another. "Are you alright?" Stan asked, snaking Bev out of Ben's arms as he moved to check on Bill. He brushed a stray hair from her eyes as she nodded, clinging to him. She released a sob and reached past him, pulling Richie's chest flush to Stan's back, trapping him between them. In that moment, even though he'd rather have been just about any place else, he couldn't imagine wanting to be with anyone else.

Extricating himself from Eddie and Bill's Grasp, Ben moved to circle the structure calling for their missing friend. "Mike, where are you?!" His heart leaped in his throat with every moment of silence. The other losers began screaming his name, terrified that, after everything, they might have lost one of their own after all. Stan willed his tears not to fall.

From a far corner, the crunch of rocks underfoot startled the six Losers. Ambling into their periphery, Mike called to them, "I'm here." He was breathless and trembling, the blood dripping from his brow anything but a good sign.

As he threw his arms around the taller man's neck, Stan asked, a little calmer, now that they were all together. "Did we do it?" There was a spark of hope in his voice. Could it be over?

"Is that it?" Bill asked, eyeing Mike warily. There was something off about his expression. Bev noticed it too, clenching her jaw to keep from crying out what she expected she knew.

Eddie, however, missed it entirely. "Yeah, did we do it?"

"We-we-we put the tokens in the- in the thing!" Richie asked, nearly tripping over himself as he rushed toward Mike and gestured back from where they'd come. "That's good, right?"

"We did it, right?" Ben asked over Richie, shining his flashlight at the men.

Immediately, he regretted it. The dark was nicer. It was safer. In the dark, there was hope. The pinpoint beam of his flashlight snuffed that ember to nothing. Illuminated in the central area where they'd just been, was the too-large, too-smiling face of Pennywise.

Having revealed himself to them for the first time, It was now larger than they'd ever seen It. Perched atop barbed legs, Its true form appeared to be some sort of monstrous spider. The head alone was twice as large as any of the Losers. Each of the legs seemed to go on forever.

The group scrambled backward into one another's arms. "Shit!"

Richie reached his arm across Eddie and Stan, hand connecting with Bill's sleeve as they backed themselves toward a wall.

It smiled a threatening smile and began to taunt them. "Oh... did it work, Mikey? Did it work?" A sinister laugh in the echoing silence. "Tell them why your silly little ritual didn't work! Tell them it's all just a-" Pennywise pointed his attention from Mike across the other Losers, settling on one in particular. "What's the word, Eds-" It stuck its head out a little, between two of the finger-like prongs of the sculpture in the middle of the chamber and stared him down. Richie brought his left hand back and aligned himself directly between them. If It wanted Eddie, It was going to have to go through him. Pleased with himself, Pennywise finally spat out the word he'd been chewing on. "Gazebo?"

Eddie's eyes went wide as saucers. "Mike, what's he talking about?"

They're gazebos! They're bullshit! His voice from all those years prior reverberated in his head again. If that was the fear it was playing off of, the inert placeholders that had been the ties that bound Eddie to his mother for all those years, that had to mean the ritual was nothing more than a means to placate them, too. Empty words. Bullshit.

The rest of the Losers weren't far behind in their own realization. Bill's head snapped to stare at the man. "Mikey?" His query was answered merely by the wordless tears streaming down his face.

Reveling in his perfectly set trap, the clown cooed in mock pity, "Oh, Mikey, you never showed them the fourth side, didja? Too afraid to tell them what really happened to the poor Shokopiwah." He made a distinctly grotesque imitation of devouring them. He stuck the end of one of his claws in his mouth and gave it a wet lick, the blood of the tribe as unctuous in his memory as any five-star meal could have been for the losers. Their fear had marinated in their bones and It couldn't get enough. He could smell that the Losers were nearing the same levels. There weren't as many of them, so he would just have to savor it. But he was so hungry...

"Fuck, Mikey. You lied to us again?" Bill roared, temporary deafness all-but-forgotten.

Startled back into the moment, Mike stumbled for words. “No! They didn’t-” he looked over at his friends, and then immediately away. It was going to work. It had to. They couldn’t have done all of this for nothing. “They didn’t believe! They didn’t believe they could kill It.” They could. They had to. “*That’s* why it didn’t work back then,” he said, voice broken and desperate.

Hardly able to stand for the shaking in his legs, Richie turned to him. “Are you fucking kidding me, Mike?!” he shouted, anger surpassing Bill’s by far.

The clown scrambled toward them. Eddie brandished his weapon in trembling fingers. “Fuck!” he spat, realizing that they were so far beyond screwed.

“Fuck you, Mikey!” Bill cursed, tears streaming furiously from his eyes.

Moving closer to Mike, Stan reached out and gave his arm a shove. “What the fuck, man?” He couldn’t believe it. After everything, he was going to die in a sewer in Derry.

His tone grew urgent as he stepped closer to the group, realizing he was still far away from them. “I needed something, a-a-anything for us to remember! Anything for us to believe!” He reached for Bill’s arm to try to catch his focus but was brushed away. He couldn’t do anything but stare at the behemoth, grim visage before him.

Unwilling to wrap his head around it, Richie balled his hands into fists, burying them in his thighs as he doubled over. “Fuck!” His mind whirled, a million ways to get them out. He looked at the rest of the Losers. He’d never been the strategist, but he’d be damned if, over the course of his life, he hadn’t spent a decent amount of time telling an unhearing television screen that the people on it were idiots for not doing what he would do in any given stressful situation: Run.

It was taunting them. It was goading them. “God damn it!” Bill raged. He couldn’t believe that they’d been put in this situation again. This time, at least, he hadn’t been the one dragging them in unwillingly. They were adults, now. They’d made their own

decisions.

A blinding burst of light erupted from behind Pennywise from within the splayed rocky fingers which still held the remnants of their ritual. Three familiar orbs darted around the room, seeking a victim. *You'll float too.*

"It's the deadlights! Don't look at them!" Bev shouted, shielding her vision in the crook of her arm. She knew too well what that vision granted and she didn't want it again. She shoved against Ben, trying to direct them all out.

As the clown began to make strides toward them, they backed out of the way, Bev managing to dislodge Stan from where he stood, rooted to the spot. "27 years, I dreamt of you," It's teasing voice boomed, each step sending rocks cascading to the ground. "I craved you." It licked its lips, moving directly toward Mike, who could do nothing but stand, shellshocked. He'd been so sure, so so so sure. "Oh, I missed you all!"

"Mike, move back," Ben coached, tugging at his friend.

From the side, still holding Bev's hand, Stan shouted: "Come on, Mike, get out of the way!" No matter what, he couldn't bear to watch as he was torn apart by Pennywise. He looked over at Bill, who appeared to be thinking the same thing.

Gesturing toward a tunnel that appeared to be their only way out, Bill called to him. "We gotta go, Mikey!"

Unmoving, Mike stood stock still, still staring up at the clown, sobbing. "I'm sorry, guys. I'm sorry." Bill ran toward him, nodding at Ben, and they tried to muscle him backward. "I'm so sorry." He pushed them off, but they were determined. They'd figure it all out, but for the time being, what they needed was Mike to get out of the way so that they could regroup. "This is all my fault," he cried.

In an instant, It's claw was raised before them, hesitating as it decided who to take first. "Time to float," It chortled, before bringing the barbed end down at Mike.

With an adrenaline-fueled push, Ben managed to get the three of them moving, but not before the sleeve of Mike's shirt was sheared down the length. It had almost gotten him.

Realizing their close call and placing the start of a second blow, Bill tugged ahead, sending them chasing around the cavern, all seven darting away from their tormentor. The first to spot an out, Richie and Eddie tucked down a tunnel and out of the way. Bill was moving at the head of the group, until- "Oh, shit!" he hissed, as he nearly tripped over a dislodged stalactite, only to land against his friends. Mike rolled behind a boulder and hid, tucking into himself.

"Go, go, go, go, go!" Ben urged, pulling Bev along with him down a second tunnel. Anything to get them out of Pennywise's reach.

"Come on, get up!" Stan called over his shoulder, heading down the tunnel after Richie and Eddie. He watched as Bill worked to pull Mike to his feet. "Let's go!" he called, turning off of the main path and realizing, somehow, he'd wound up alone. No sooner had his brain made that connection, the ground crumbled out from beneath him. More accurately, he realized, he was caught in a net and being burst through the ceiling.

Running had never been Richie's thing. It had, however, when they were teenagers, been Eddie's. As soon as he realized that he *could* and that he *wasn't* weak, he did. His legs, his heart, even his lungs, were really fucking strong. He welcomed the familiar burn in his chest that accompanied a particularly strenuous bout. It was especially helpful, he'd found, when one chilly, grey afternoon, a blond boy had taken to screaming some really hurtful shit at Richie. He'd stormed up to him, 5'6" of pure fury, kicked the kid in the shin. When he'd gone down, he landed one more blow to the kid's jaw.

Stunned, Richie stood back, staring at the scene that had played out before him. He was helpless and absolutely in love. Eddie was, very literally, defending his honor and he couldn't possibly know that he was defending him against the truth. If he did, he would never have done it. Especially when the prick stood off to chase them down.

Instead, Eddie grabbed him by the hand and pulled him in the direction of Freese's.. "Come on, Richie! Go!" He shoved him

through the open doors and followed, knowing Richie's survival instincts would take over eventually. "Go!"

"I'm going," he answered, tugging him off through the kitchenware section and up the escalator. "What the fuck?" He asked Eddie, regarding his sudden attack, taking the steps two at a time.

The shorter boy shrugged. "Is he following us?" He looked over his shoulder to make sure he hadn't caught up.

Richie laughed, turning them through the ladies' lingerie and into the back stairs. "No. I mean, I'm sure he thinks he is, but no." About midway down, he sat on the landing to catch his breath, tugging Eddie down beside him.

Showing no sign of exertion, he still sat beside his friend. "Why was he chasing us?" Eddie asked.

"You didn't hear what he was saying?" Richie guffawed.

Eddie had heard him. Of course, he had. But it wasn't anything they hadn't heard before. It certainly wasn't the worst thing either of them had been called. "I heard him calling you names," he said with an unbothered shrug. It had never really bothered Richie before, or at least, not to the point that it had that day.

Going to fuck your boyfriend, faggot? Better him than me. Richie had frozen. *Why are you being weird? I'm not your boyfriend.* He and Eddie had been fucking around in the park with a trac ball set they'd found discarded by the swings when a familiar boy with blond curls came trotting toward them, eyes set to kill. Richie had just finished lobbing the ball directly at Eddie's ass, causing him to launch straight into the air, granting him his first shot at being taller than Richie since those two glorious weeks in the fourth grade. *I'm sick of this town being full of fucking fairies. Maybe I oughtta put an end to it. Straighten you out before you spread it to your little friend.* The boy stepped toward them. Richie could think of nothing but that, maybe, just *maybe*, he should let him do it- let him beat the shit out of him. At least, then, Eddie would see him for what he was. But that hadn't even had a chance to come to fruition because Eddie saw red. He was so fucking done with the bullshit in this town and he was even

more done with people shitting all over Richie, especially when he wasn't... *that* . Richie wasn't. But if he was, that would still have been okay because Eddie was .

Pushing his glasses up onto his head and holding back his now unruly hair- *that Eddie found himself fighting every impulse in his body to run his fingers through* - and dug the heels of his hands into his eyes, willing himself not to cry. That could only make things worse, especially considering that, now, he knew he had to tell Eddie the truth. There could be no joking. No punchline except the one that was the sum total of his nearly 15 years of existence. "Yeah, names that are true, Eds," he groaned, leaning against the metal railing of the staircase.

Eddie managed to not roll his eyes but couldn't help voicing his disbelief. "Oh, come on, Richie," he said, digging his shoulder in against him. "You're constantly talking about girls and..."

Cutting him off, Richie corrected awkwardly. "I *do like* girls, but..." he started kneading at his fingertips, fumbling for words.

"Then you can't be..." Eddie concluded, as though it was the clearest cut, obvious thing in the world, but still unable to come up with a word that he didn't think would make Richie recoil, settling on "*what he said ...*"

Richie was glad for the blur his lack of glasses afforded him. He couldn't quite make out the expression on Eddie's face and, maybe that was for the best. "I like guys the same way. More, most of the time." Definitely for the best. Without his glasses, he couldn't see the disgust he was sure was there.

But disgust was the furthest thing from Eddie's mind. He breathed a quiet "Oh," swallowing down the hope that had risen as his gut twisted threateningly. He stared down at his feet, expecting the crushing blow of a *not you though, don't worry* to come immediately after.

It didn't.

Instead, Richie jerked his head in the direction of the store. "And *he's* Bowers' cousin," he said, not looking away from the edge of his index

finger.

“Oh,” Eddie repeated. He knew there had to be something- some reason that Richie had been so thrown by the interaction. “From the arcade that summer?”

Exhaling a puff of a laugh, Richie nodded, letting his glasses drift back to where they belonged. “Yeah,” he said because it didn’t need rehashing. Eddie remembered *that* which meant he must have remembered the way Richie had sobbed wordlessly that night, a sopping wet lump at the foot of his bed. How he’d been largely unable to give him details. How he’d prickled at the small touches that usually comforted him. *Yeah* just about summed it up.

The boys sat quietly for a few minutes. To Eddie, it was comfortable, contemplative. To Richie, it was deafening, suffocating. He felt the need to itch himself out of his skin. A few tears began to fall, but Richie hoped that, maybe, if he didn’t acknowledge them, Eddie wouldn’t notice.

“Richie?” Eddie finally asked, breaking the silence.

Forcing himself not to look over, he simply hummed in recognition.

Scooting closer, Eddie tapped his foot against his. “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“I did,” he answered, intentionally misinterpreting the question. “I told you right after it happened.”

All too familiar with this type of deflection, Eddie played along. He could even ignore the tears he was so desperate to reach out and dry if that was the way he wanted to do it. “But you didn’t tell me...” *That it was true. That you like boys. That there could be a chance. That I didn’t have to be so afraid that you’d hate me if you figured out how I feel about you.* When he couldn’t decide how to end the sentence, he decided to drop it. Richie looked at him expectantly and Eddie lost his nerve. “Forget it.”

Turning his whole body to face Eddie, his knee pressed hard against the other boy’s, he rushed to amend what he realized he had just

potentially broken. “It doesn’t change anything, right?” He asked, sure Eddie could hear the pounding of his heart if he stopped speaking. “I mean, I’ve tried not to be and I mean, if you think that you can’t be friends with me because of it anymore I would rather die so like say the word and I’ll either go back to hiding it or walk out onto the highway or something because I can’t lose you over this but it’s a part of who I am and-”

“Richie...” Eddie sighed, resting his head to the side and propping his elbow on the step above them.

“I know it’s not ideal and I know that it makes everything around here dangerous so if you don’t want to be seen with me or hang out with me anymore, I get it, Eds, I do. Fuck, *I* don’t want to be seen with me half the time.” Richie snorted a sardonic laugh, only half-realizing just how fucked up that sounded. The slight raise of Eddie’s eyebrows had been the only signal that he had gone too far because Eddie seldom beeped him. “I just need you to know that this is what it’s like for me. All the time. And that makes me a serious loser.”

Daring himself to fold his fingers over Richie’s knee, which he had done subconsciously a million times but in this moment, it was different somehow, he offered Richie the tenderness he needed. “We’re both losers,” he assured. It wasn’t much, but it was an attempt; *a please Richie, understand what I mean so I don’t have to say it, too.*

Somehow, Richie’s body didn’t get the panicked memo that his brain did. He melted into the touch he so desperately wanted, even putting his hand down firmly atop Eddie’s. He pressed a little harder to Eddie’s side and shook his head. “No, Eds, I mean lower-case-I-get-beat-up-and-made-fun-of-try-to-avoid-me-cross-the-street-if-you-have-to-just-don’t-be-seen-with-me loser.” His eyes searched Eddie’s. He was trying to give him an out. If he didn’t run now, but chose to do it later when he realized just how uncomfortable it really made him, Richie thought he might *actually* die.

“Then, we both are,” Eddie admitted flatly. “Probably me more than you.”

Richie gave an incredulous laugh. “That’s not possible. You’re...” he

locked eyes with Eddie, knowing that this was going to make absolutely everything worse. Even as horrible as he felt, he couldn't let Eddie think anything less than the best about himself. "I see the way girls look at you. You're a Saved By The Bell approved cutie and you're smart and you're funny and, even though *I know better*," he said, a smug grin curling at the edges of his lips, "you still have that I-respect-my-mom-so-I'll-respect-you vibe that people, girls, I mean, fucking eat up."

"People?" Eddie asked, raising his eyebrows slightly.

Yep. There it was. Richie was so *incredibly* fucked. "Yeah, people," he said, shoving the words people like me right back down into the depths of his soul where they belonged. If they stayed there, they would wither and die and no one would ever know that he was some sort of pathetic, broken, love-starved fuck up who had fallen in love with his best friend.

In the ensuing silence, Eddie felt emboldened. For someone like Richie, who normally never shut the hell up, to be this quiet, he felt like he had to take up the slack. "Richie, you know I'm gay, right?"

Richie scoffed. "That's real nice, Eds. I should have known," he stood up, moving down toward the exit to the loading docks and meaning to make his way home. Still, he circled back, adjusting his glasses. "God, why didn't I expect you to be a jerk about it?" Kicking himself, he stared up at Eddie. Here it was. The moment where it was all going to come crashing down around him. He *had* wanted it to be quick, hadn't he? Still, he'd hoped...

"I'm being serious," he answered, folding his arms around his middle. He'd wait. He could wait forever if it meant that Richie would, maybe, calm down. He'd heard him. It just had to sink into his thick skull.

Still, he was reeling. He threw his arms open wide, making himself as vulnerable as he felt. "I mean, I just opened up to you about the biggest secret I have and you just throw it back in my face and..." he managed to catch a glimpse of Eddie's patient, *dare he say it*- fond gaze. "You're serious." Eddie nodded, realizing that that was so much quicker than he'd expected. "You're gay?"

"I am," he said, sliding forward to his feet and descending to catch up with Richie. "And stop looking at me like that," he said, giving him a playful shove.

"Like what?" Richie asked incredulously. *Like I'm completely and utterly in love with you? Like I would do anything you asked? Like I've never felt this stupidly warm before?*

"Like what little brain you had in that head of yours gave out completely and is not leaking out of your ear," Eddie groaned.

That was not what he was expecting. "Gross," he laughed, shaking his head as he opened the door.

The boys made their way through Derry's downtown. Even though the town was the same, Richie couldn't help but feel like everything had changed. Even the freezing rain didn't seem quite as it had. The majority of their walk passed in amiable silence; a rarity for them. "Thank you," he said, as they turned onto the bottom of Eddie's street.

"For what?" he asked, stuffing his hands further into his jacket pockets.

Richie shrugged. "For not freaking out." Eddie's face twisted in confusion, but he was interrupted quickly. "I know what you said, and I get that that's probably why, but either way, thank you."

Shoving his shoulder into the taller boy, he laughed. "That would be some next level self-loathing."

"Yeah..." Richie mused. *Like the way I've felt for so long. Next level. That's me.* Eventually, they reached the edge of the Kaspbrak property. The boys stopped to face each other. They each hesitated, another confession lingering unsaid on the tip of their tongues. *One thing at a time*, Richie supposed. Eddie didn't hate him. That was enough. "I'll see you tomorrow, Spaghetti," he said, smiling that same crooked smile that Eddie couldn't get enough of.

Fucker. "Okay, I take it all back. I hate you," Eddie groaned.

Richie shook his head. "Nah," he countered. Mustering up his

courage, he pulled him into a tight hug. If it was a little lingering, neither of them minded. When Richie finally loosened his grip, Eddie seemed reluctant to do so. They parted and, noticing his mother in the window, he rolled his eyes pointedly. He made his way up the front walk and Richie watched as Eddie nearly slid headlong into the door. All because, it seemed, he couldn't take his eyes off of Richie.

The next time Eddie nearly slammed into a door, though, it wasn't being transfixed on Richie. They were both running full speed down a dank corridor that came to a sudden stop. A wall. Three doors. Three choices, written in blood that seemed to drip the wrong way.

"Watch out!" Eddie warned, sticking his arm out to catch Richie before he slammed into the wall.

Recognizing the doors, Richie voiced a startled "What the fuck?" These were doors in the house above. What the fuck were they doing down here?

Double-checking with his partner, Eddie looked over as he reached for the doorknob. "Not Scary At All, right?"

"No, no no no, nonono, no!" Richie spluttered, grabbing Eddie's wrist and wincing. "He's-" he fought off the repeating images from last time. *Wanna play loogie? Where are my legs? Eddie's pallid face vomiting black sludge. Betty Ripsom's amputated torso.* "He's fucking with us," he insisted, pointing then to Very Scary. "They're inverted."

Nodding, understanding the process, "Are you sure?" he asked.

Richie shook his head. "No." He then took a deep breath and placed Eddie's still outstretched hand under his, redirecting it to his intended door. "But, Bill and I did this last time. Do you trust me?"

"Yes," he said plainly.

Exhaling for what felt like the first time in days, Richie said, "Okay." His voice was unsteady, but given the circumstances, why should his voice be any different than every other part of his body?

Once more for clarity, Eddie repeated the words he really didn't want

to hear. “So, Very Scary?”

“Very Scary,” Richie affirmed. Together, they opened the door.

To their house ?

Unbelievably, behind the door lay the one thing they both wanted more than anything else. Their living room; empty, warm, quiet. The white walls and light oak hardwood, the earthy textiles, the open floorplan into the kitchen. All the same as it had been when they left it. Now, though, they could see the Ben in it, strangely. The exposed beams, the flow from one room to the next. No matter where in the house you were, you weren't isolated. They'd always loved that, even from the kitchen to their bedroom upstairs, they could still carry on a conversation with hardly raising their voices. “It's...” Eddie stepped inside, peeking up the hallway that led to their studies and found the first thing out of place. A child's drawing on the door. “Hm. Okay...”

Following behind, Richie's eyes settled on it, too. A stick figure drawing of two men, presumably Richie and Eddie if the glasses and neatly combed hair were any indication, held the outstretched hands of a tiny stick figure with pigtails and a purple dress. “What the fuck?” Richie asked, looking over at Eddie, wondering if he'd missed something before they left.

But Eddie took a step back. “Okay, maybe he's not fucking with us.” His eyes widened with each step until he was back in the living room.

“Oh, no, he's still fucking with us,” Richie assured, turning dismissively and heading for the steps, finding differences number two and three as he tripped over a tiny pair of white patent leather mary janes and a neon rainbow Jansport backpack.

Picking up the technicolor bag with the same caution one would expect from a member of the bomb squad, he turned slowly to Richie. “What is this?” he asked. Before he could respond, soft footfalls were coming from above them. “Okay...”

As the pieces came together, Richie started off with a “What the f-”

But a living doll, no more than five, came bounding down the steps

and threw herself into Eddie's arms, caught reflexively. "Daddy!" The little girl shrieked with glee, burying her face in Eddie's shoulder. "You're home!" *If you lived here, you'd be home by now.*

"Woah! What?" Richie asked under his breath. He wasn't accustomed to these little tricks being good things. Had he hit his head? Was he dead? Was all of this a really fucking weird dream? He couldn't help hoping it was real, but he knew that was a distraction. That was probably what It wanted. Fuck, if he had spidey senses, they were off the charts, allergic reaction, phone on vibrate, doused in KY tingling.

The tiny girl with immaculate pj's, covered in fluffy little dogs, smiled too-broadly. "Daddy! I took my medicine just like you said! I brushed my teeth and combed my hair and everything!" She ran her fingers through her long curly brown locks demonstratively, clearly proud of herself.

"That's... that's great..." Eddie stammered, holding the kid at arms length, clearly wanting not sharing Richie's internal conflict.

It was almost too easy, really. "Daddy?" Richie teased behind the little girl's head, before finally letting himself get to it. "Eds, what..."

"What happened to your cheek, Pops?" the girl asked, reaching out for Richie, now. Eddie all-too-willingly handed the tyke over as she asked, "Did it get a boo-boo?" She prodded curiously around the bandage with sparkly purple fingernails.

Musing over the situation and instinctively catching the girl's wrist before she could pick the gauze off, Eddie mouthed over the strange word. "Pops?" That didn't sound like a name either of them would choose. Papa, *maybe* . Not that Eddie had ever given it that much thought.

It was different for Richie, though. The longer they spent in this room, the more he sank into this reality, whatever it was. "Something like that..." he said, tucking a curl behind the little one's ear.

A mischievous twinkle crossed her eyes that, in Richie's mind, was so

Eddie. "Can I kiss it better?" she asked sweetly.

The men exchanged a wary look. Eddie shook his head and gave him a dramatic 'cut' gesture, swinging his hand across his neck emphatically. The little girl pouted and a dark feeling dropped over Richie. Pop. Like a balloon. He put the tyke down on the stairs and took a step back, grabbing the back of Eddie's jacket and pulling him along with.

He'd made his decision not a moment too soon. The little girl's jaw seemed to come unhinged, unleashing rows upon rows of jagged shark's teeth.

"Fuck," Eddie yelped, jumping back over the edge of the sectional, raking it open with Bev's fence post.

Nodding along, Richie added, "Yeah, that tracks."

The kid's face began to morph. Her eyes yellowed. One began to drift lower on her cheek. Her voice warbled into a deeper, waterlogged tone. "Baby will make it all better," she cooed, previously neat fingernails stretching into blood-drenched claws that were reaching out for them. She lunged, catapulting onto Eddie's arm, digging in.

"Holy shit!" Richie shouted. He reached around for something he could use to beat the brat off. "Eddie!" he called, as he grabbed the pink marble bowl from the center of the coffee table and swung it directly at Its head.

Falling to the floor with an unceremonious thud, the little thing seemed relatively unphased. "Richie!" Eddie exclaimed. He darted to his side, grabbing a cast iron candle holder and brandishing it, too. He'd never noticed before how fair amount of their belongings were decent impromptu weapons.

From the spot where the childlike attacker had fallen, It looked up at them with growing doe eyes. "Why are you looking at me like that, Daddy?" It began to wail, loudly, reaching up for Eddie. "Don't you love me?" In a wordless response, Eddie hurled the candlestick at the specter, who caught and deflected it with ease. "Come back and

play! Come back and play!” It commanded.

The men bolted through their house. Richie chucked the bowl back at their would-be daughter and pulled Eddie back through their front door. He leaned back against it panting. “Holy shit.”

“What the fuck?” Eddie asked, nodding.

As they started making their way through the tunnel again, Richie pointed back over his shoulder. “I think that’s something we need to unpack later.”

Taken aback, he stopped in his tracks. “What?” He couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

Turning back to stand in front of him, Richie folded his arms. “Kids. Are you afraid of them?” They’d broached the topic before. Never really seriously, of course. Money was tight. The timing was wrong. We don’t have a family network to fall back on. Maybe after we’re married. Maybe after we turn thirty. The excuses were endless.

Eddie balked. “Now, Rich?” He shook his head, dazed. “Right now, you wanna talk about this?” he snapped, picking his pace back up.

“Right. Sorry,” Richie laughed, realizing that he’d just tried to broach the topic of having a kid at what was possibly the world’s worst possible moment. “Timing,” he reminded himself quietly before taking off after him.

Meanwhile, closer to the main chamber, Stanley was captured in a glass box. “Can’t get out. Can’t get out,” Pennywise teased, sticking his hand in to toy with him. “Little Starling Stanley in his little gilded cage. Has to watch all his friends tortured and plucked.” Everyone else’s torments were active. Bill, Georgie, and his younger self in the basement. Ben in the clubhouse. Bev in the girls’ bathroom. Richie and Eddie with the kid. Even Mike, hiding, trembling behind the rock. They were all involved in their tortures. Stanley, however, like always was only tormented by observation. He thrust himself against the side of the box, trying to break through.

It gave a giddy giggle. “Alouette, gentille Alouette. Alouette, je te

plumerais,” It sang, grabbing Stan’s arm between his thumb and forefinger, pinching it back. “Je te plumerais les ailes.” It twisted it forward and Stanley grimaced. “Je te plumerais les ailes.” It began wiggling his limb back and forth as a fidgety child would do to a can tab, meaning to rip it off. “Et les ailes.” Its voice dropped low, grabbing his other arm. “Et les ailes.” He lifted him off the floor of the box like a rag doll. Stanley screamed. It didn’t make a difference. No one could hear him. “Et le bec.” It added, pressing Its hand over his nose and mouth. “Et le bec.” It sang on and on, voice light and airy as though imitating a child. “Et la tête.” It smacked him on the back of the head. “Et la tête.” The top of the head. “Alouette.” It bashed the glass box back and forth a few times, jarring Stan hard enough that he landed face down on the bottom, teeth gnashed against his lip, drawing blood. “Alouette.” Finally, it spun the box around like a top, sending him careening into the corner, grasping uselessly for anything to hold on to. *So much for passive.* “Oh!” The clown finished his ditty, devolving into a menacing laugh.

“Get fucked,” Stanley spat, kicking at the side of the box with all his might, causing the slightest webbed crack. Encouraged, he continued to pound at the same spot over and over.

Tutting, Pennywise wagged his finger. “Oh. Not so gentile language, pretty bird.” He pointed to the room below, where Bill was fighting against the current to get back to Mike. “See the way this one swims? All of your friends, all the losers, they swim! Just like at the quarry. Jump, fall, swim. It’s fun!” He laughed, licking his lips and reaching in to tease Stan once more. “Soon, they’ll float like itty,” *poke* , “bitty,” *poke* , “Georgie!” Stan kicked the clown’s hand and it pulled back. It was not happy about that. “Not you, Stanley! Not you. You can’t even tread water,” he snarled, plucking through the ropes that suspended the box in midair. “Let’s see if you can fly!” Laughing once more, he broke the final cord and sent him plummeting to the ground. “Don’t forget your parachute!” he prompted, littering the ground with blood splattered yarmulke.

SMASH!

The box shattered, with Stan still inside, just in front of where Eddie and Richie were turning out of their pathway.

Realizing that the folded, bloodied form in front of them had to be one of the Losers, Eddie picked up the pace. As he neared him, he spotted the familiar black cardigan and dark curls. "Stan!" he cried, darting to his side. First and foremost, he put two fingers out to his neck. A pulse. He put his hand out in front of his nose. Breathing. *Breathing* . That was something that Eddie could now remind himself to do.

Richie wasn't too far behind. "Fuck!" he hissed, leaning down beside them and giving his friend a shake. "Stan, wake up, man." Eddie looked up at him, concerned. "Nap time's over, buddy, come on!" Richie reached out and smacked him lightly a couple of times, eventually getting him to stir.

"Hey, there we go," Eddie laughed, helping him up to a seated position. "You alright?"

Checking himself over, he seemed fine. A loss of consciousness was probably not great, but he knew where he was, he knew who the two men in front of him were, and he knew they had to kill this fucking clown, so yeah- he was as fine as he could hope for. "Yeah. I'm good, I think."

"Gotta stop scaring us like that, bud," Richie said, helping him to his feet.

Stan squeaked out an offended, "Me?!" The absolute *nerve* of that prick! He crossed his arms and bit his lip, organizing his thoughts. "We're dealing with a fucking intergalactic demon killer clown and *I'm* the one scaring *you*?" Richie nodded, earning himself a series of sharp pokes to the chest. "I just had to watch all of your little tortures from a cage, *pops* !" he spat.

"Yeah, you!" Richie groaned, poking him in the chest too, sarcastically returning his ire. "We're all getting out of here alive so you can't keep making us think you're not." He didn't once look away from Stan's eyes until he realized just what he meant.

When he did, he folded. "Fine. Let's get the fuck out there."

For once, Eddie got to roll his eyes at the bickering. He tugged the

pair back toward the space where they'd performed the ritual. Hearing a struggle, they took off at a run.

Skidding to the edge of the tunnel, somehow, Richie made it ahead of Eddie and Stan. "We're heeeere!" he sing-songed. When his Eddie approved Carol Anne voice didn't distract the clown from where it had Mike and Bill cornered, he tried again. "Hey, shit for brains," he mocked, voice booming around the cavern. "You're still oh for 7, wasteoid!" He picked up a rock from the ground and turned it over in his hand a couple of times. "It made sense when we were kids, all slippery and young and shit." He climbed up onto a nearby precipice and shouted, now the sole target of Pennywise's stunned attention. "But you can't take down a bunch of middle-aged Losers?" Every passing moment, the rock seemed to weigh down his hand ever so slightly more. "God, you know my secret? Here's a secret for ya!" He cupped a hand over the side of his mouth, secretively. Still, he shouted even louder, "You're a sloppy, bitch!" Its mouth dropped open and Richie felt emboldened. In one swoop, he pulled his arm back with a broad, "Yippee-ki-yay, motherfu-"

You'll float, too.

And he did.

The deadlights poured out of Its mouth and Richie was caught helpless within them. Hovering above the ground, time stopped. The world may as well have stopped turning. Eyes white and jaw slack, the rock dropped from his hand, clattering to the ground.

Reaching the mouth of the tunnel, side by side with Stan, Eddie saw Richie's lifeless body floating before him and let out a strangled scream. "Richie!"

Notes for the Chapter:

Again, I feel the need to mention that, if it wouldn't be affected by Richie and Eddie being canon or Stan being alive, it's going largely untouched. For instance, Bill in the Basement, Bev in the Bathroom, Ben in the Clubhouse all exist untouched, so I didn't go back and rewrite them.

7. After Everything I Must Confess I Need You

Summary for the Chapter:

Richie's time in the deadlights and the final battle with Pennywise.

There's a fluorescent buzz. It's warm. It's too bright, but somehow comforting. It's like stepping out into the mid-day sun from an early matinee. He's everywhere and nowhere all at once and Richie knows he should be scared- he is, or at least part of him is- but until he can figure out what's going on, there's no use.

"He can't see without his glasses," screams through his mind.

Richie can feel that he's not on the floor. He can't see Eddie. He can't see Bill or Stan or Bev or Ben or Mike. But he can't see Eddie and that's when he starts to realize that something is wrong. It's wrong. He can't see him. He can't hear him. He can't feel him. He's not here. He's not here and that can't be. Something's *wrong*.

"What I do remember is you," a too far off version of his voice assures weakly, before Eddie's rings in, answering an echoey, "But you didn't for a minute last night, did you?"

And then he's falling. It's almost like when they used to jump into the quarry when they were kids. Almost. But there's no splash. It's never-ending.

"You see my loogie? It went the farthest!" And the blob of mucus was flying beside him. Falling. Floating.

It was happening. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Richie was reaching the realization that this must be the deadlights. The deadlights. It. The sewers. *That's* why nothing feels right. Nothing is right.

The clown's voice swirling around consciousness, yelling "They all float down here!" Shrieking. Screaming. Deafening. Bev's blank expression when the deadlights caught her all those years earlier

flashed before him. Is that what he looked like right now? When would the visions of death start? What had Bev been so twisted about? This was nothing.

There's a buzz. There's a blast. Richie can feel it. The lights are bright and warm and he's invincible.

Power surging through his veins; adrenaline, perhaps? His nerve endings are on fire. He can do anything. "And now I have to kill this fucking clown!" If he could have a baseball bat, he could wreck It's shit right now.

He's 17 and throwing rocks at Eddie's window. He climbs up. He knocks and Eddie just about jumps out of his skin. He darts do the sill and opens it. "What are you doing?"

"Saving the princess," Richie says, throwing one long leg in.

Eddie laughs, pushing at his leg. "The princess is in another castle, dickwad. My mom's on the warpath tonight."

Unwilling to hear that, Richie swings both legs in. "But I've traveled so far and the hour is so late," he smiles, every bit Prince Charming, if Prince Charming had never had a haircut, had the World's Worst Vision, and was just about the least family-friendly human on the planet. "No wicked witch can keep me from my love."

"One kiss and then you're gone," Eddie whispers, hushed.

Seeing that as an opening, Richie brings a hand to Eddie's neck and joins their mouths. Eddie pushes him back and he tumbles off the roof landing seated on Bev's fire escape.

He's 13. She's leaving. He can't tell her how much he'll miss her. Instead, he bums a smoke. "Haystack's not going to be the same without you, you know?" he says, clouds billowing from his lips.

"He'll live," she says, first heartbreak evident in her voice. She steals the cigarette from between Richie's lips and takes a deep drag. "I'm nothing special."

He laughs at her. "Do I have to do the thing?"

Her eyes go wide. "One more time for the road?"

Richie smiles. They've talked about it. They know she's not going to come back. He's jealous, but he wants to give her this. He hops to his feet, extends a hand to get the cigarette back for himself and lets it fill his lungs before descending the fire escape. "Oh, she may be weary," he croons, a cheap impression of Otis Redding, definitely not his best, but since it's normally a lip-sync, it'll suffice, "and young girls, they do get weary wearing that same old shaggy dress." He spends several minutes recreating his favorite scene from *Pretty In Pink* for Bev, to her bittersweet amusement.

When he's finished, she pulls him into a tight hug. "I'll miss you, Trashmouth."

"Shucks, Molly Ringwald," he says, clinging to her tightly, "First Bill, then Ben, now me? I'm flattered to be in such good company." He jokes to hide the tears.

She notices. She's teary, too. She gives him a little push and he's falling backward into a swingset.

He's 7. Bill has a new baby brother that he's not entirely sold on. "I could be your brother," Richie suggests.

"At l-l-l-least I'd be able to p-p-play with you," Bill shrugs, watching his friend swing. They're in the backyard. It's August. Eddie couldn't come out and play because his mom said the ragweed count was so high. Stan couldn't play because his family is sitting Shiva for his bubbie. It's just them. It's a little weird but he doesn't mind. "Even if you d-d-d-do annoy me."

He's going higher and higher. "I'll stop annoying you if you push me."

Bill thinks it over. "D-d-d-don't." He moves behind his friend and gives him a big shove. "I don't know w-w-what I'd do if you s-s-s-stopped." He gave him one more push that knocked him off the swing and to his knees on the clubhouse floor.

He's 14. It's snowing. He's alone with Ben. It's a rarity, but he's

excited. He loves Haystack dearly. He empathizes with him. And he's leaving. And he's pissed about it. But not at Ben, but it leaves four. He knows he'll survive. But Mike's different since Bill left. He doesn't know what he would do if Stan left. He won't let himself imagine Eddie leaving. He can't do it.

"The fuck are we doing down here, Haystack?" he asks.

Ben shrugs. "I wanted to make sure you were going to be okay."

Richie's thrown. "Me? Are you kidding? I'm always okay," he assures. "Just call me Oklahoma."

He shakes his head. "It's okay to show your emotions, Richie," he says, reaching a gentle hand out to rest on his shoulder. "It won't kill you."

"You never know, haystack," he says, accenting it with a cough. Then a gag. "Emotions could be the new plague." He stumbles dramatically, gasping for air. "I've caught them. The feelings," he says, voice hoarse and strained, "Run before they catch you, too. Save... Yourself..."

"You're a menace," he laughs, shoving Richie over. He lands on the hammock, then flips, then rolls out of it landing with a hmph at the helm of the restocking cart at the library.

He's 18. He's leaving Derry in two months. He still can't bring himself to tell Mike that he's been seeing Eddie for almost two years. He's still so fucking scared.

Mike's in front of him, plucking books from the cart and putting them back on the shelf. He seems like he's biting something back. He's putting a stack of books back in the 154.7's and Richie doesn't know why he notices. "I'm almost done, Rich, then we can head out and get ice cream. I promise," he says dryly.

"Have I complained?" He hasn't. He won't. He's going to miss Mike. He's trying not to worry that he's going to forget him. He's trying not to remember that Bev did. That Bill did. That Ben did. That Stan... He shakes his head. That doesn't help.

Mike laughs softly. "No. No, you've been a good helper, Richie," he admits, trying not to sound as condescending as it probably does. "I appreciate you."

It's weird. It's soft. Richie's gotten better with his emotions. He can thank Eddie for that, he supposes. But he still can't help but flinch at the way his stomach churns at the feeling. Before he can really put his mind on what he's doing, he's stopped pushing the cart and is tossing his arms around Mike's neck. "Right back at ya, man," he's saying.

It throws him off, a little, the sudden affection, but Mike's okay with it. He lets himself hug and be hugged by Richie, even if this town isn't okay with it. He knows Richie needs it. He knows it's going to be hard. He knows that their friendship has a shorter expiration date than the milk in his fridge. It's all okay, though.

After a moment, though, they're laughing and Mike gives Richie a gentle shove and he stumbles back into a door.

He's 16 and Stan has locked himself in his room again and Mrs. Uris has called him to get him out of the house. It's quiet. He's worried. "Stan?" There's no answer. "Stanley?" He looks up the hallway to see Mrs. Uris looking on concerned. He nods at her. "Stan the man, I'm coming in and you can't stop me." There's shuffling and the door opens just as Richie makes impact with it, falling flat at his friend's feet.

"What were you going to do?" he asks, arms crossed as he stares down at him. "Bust my door down?"

Stan looks funny from this angle. "If I'd had to, yeah," he admits, hearing Mrs. Uris's quiet addition that she would have let him do it, too. It was only a door.

Wordlessly, Stan crosses back to where he was folding his socks neatly and putting them all in a box.

Richie looks around the abnormally sparse room. Stan's leaving soon. But this is weird. This is obsessive. "Are you alright?" He asks, hoping that he won't have to pester it out of Stan. But if there's

anyone in the world who could bother him enough to get it out of him, it's Richie.

"Does it look like it?" Stan huffs. The socks are in neat rows around the outside of the box. Then, he starts to fill the outline with neatly rolled pants.

It doesn't. It doesn't at all and Richie doesn't want to think about what it looks like. It looks like the OCD stan had been battling since they'd battled. It was flaring up again. Stress sets him off. He's stressed. Moving is stressful. Leaving is stressful. Richie is stressful. "It looks like you need a break," Richie assesses. "How long have you been at this?"

He looks at his watch, waits for the second hand to tick in line with the twelve and says "15 hours, 10 minutes, 5 seconds."

"Have you eaten anything?" he asks.

"No, can't eat until this box is done." Stan's tone is clipped, flat and final.

Richie knows that's true. If he's interrupted, he won't rest until it's done. He'll let Richie drag him away, but he'll be fitful, he'll be agitated, he won't eat, he won't drink. It won't help. "Can I help you finish or do you want me to wait?" he asks, raising to a seated position on the floor.

"No, almost done."

He nods. He won't push. "Can I wait here or do you want to be alone?" There's nothing but patience within Richie. He'll do whatever Stan wants, whatever Stan needs, to get him onto the other side of this. He worries about what his parents will do with him when they can't call Richie to come to help him through. But they'll learn. They'll have to. At least they care.

"Please stay," he says quietly. "I don't want you to go." Richie's heart twists in his chest. *I don't want you to go either, Stan the Man.* The minutes pass and finally Stan's done his box. "Okay, feed me, Seymour," he jokes. It's still off and not-quite-Stanley-on-a-normal-

day.

Richie stands and brushes off his jeans. “Okay, let’s see what kinda trouble we can get into. Order in or field trip?” he asks.

Stan thinks it over for a moment. He looks ashamed. Richie can almost tell he’s struggling to remember when he last left his *room* let alone his house. “I could go for a bowl of soup from Dreamers,” he admits.

Beaming, Richie tugs at his hands. “Perfect answer,” he says with a bounce. “Consider it done, Frankenstan.”

In mock offense, Stan scoffs. “You really did save the worst for last, didn’t you?” Mood softening, he laughs. He pushes Richie down on the bed and he bounces back and he’s squared off in front of his father.

He’s 17. He’s exhausted. He’s starving. He’s cold. He’s been locked out all night and eventually, he climbs in the kitchen window. And he’s there. He hasn’t seen his parents in weeks. They’ve been at some conference or other and left him on his own. It’s been great. He’s been basically playing house with Eddie and it’s been an almost dreamlike state of calm.

The look on his father’s face is something out of a nightmare. It’s the night he gets kicked out and Richie knows it. There’s a rift in his brain now and he’s aware that these are memories but there’s still a searing newness to them, like he doesn’t know what’s happening until it’s happening but he remembers it and it hurts.

Each punch, each kick hurts worse than he’s remembered it. His body is on autopilot. He’s going through the motions of a fight and has his father in a headlock they both know he’ll get out of. All these years, he’s forgotten where the circular burn on the tender flesh on the inside of his elbow came from. It’s happening now. He watches as his father presses his lit cigar against the skin and Richie’s grip loosens instinctively.

Richie knows what he’s saying. His mouth is moving but there’s no sound. He remembers it too well to be able to unhear it, but still, the

absence of the words is jarring. He kicks out his ankle and they're on the floor at the top of the stairs. He knows this is the part where his mother tells his father to kill him or kick him out. He knows this is the moment when he officially becomes an orphan. He knows it.

Panting and sweaty at the top of the stairs, his father lands a hard kick to the inside of Richie's hip and he's flying down the steps. Instead of the hardwood floor at the base, he lands on his elbows on a pile of pillows on Eddie's bedroom floor.

He's 16. Stan's still in Derry. The four Losers are at Eddie's. It's rare, but Eddie'd cried, actually cried, and his mother had been so flustered, she agreed, albeit begrudgingly, to let him have his friends over. She'd been softened by looming brightness that was one less of those dirty boys soon. She's gone to her sister's for the afternoon. The boys are, graciously, alone.

Mike's in the bathroom. Stan's in the kitchen. Eddie and Richie are laying on the floor. Their hands aren't touching, but the lengths of their arms are. Their legs aren't entangled, but Richie could so easily trap him there on the plush tan carpet with the slightest movement of his leg. A mixtape Richie'd made with the masking tape label of "Soft Songs To Win Over The Ladies" croons on in the background. *Saying I love you is not the words I want to hear from you.*

It's been a little more than a year since their conversation in the stairwell of Freese's and they've never said another word about it, to each other or anyone else. When they're alone like this, Richie wishes they would. Richie wishes a lot lately. Mostly, he wishes for Eddie. *It's not that I want you not to say but if you only knew how easy it would be to show me how you feel.*

Suddenly, brave, strong, fucking perfectly cute Eddie gets off a good one. He dares himself to walk his fingers over the top of Richie's and Richie feels his pulse start to race. He turns his hand over and catches it. They don't look at each other. *More than words is all you have to do to make it real.*

Or, more accurately, they make a show of not looking at each other. Richie doesn't notice Eddie's lip worried between his teeth. He doesn't notice the way Eddie's leg is pressed hard against his. He

doesn't notice the slight trembling in Eddie's fingers. He's so busy fidgeting with his glasses with his free hand, he certainly doesn't notice. He doesn't notice. He doesn't. He... *Then you wouldn't have to say that you love me.*

His fingers start to loosen and Richie fears that the moment's just about over. He turns onto his side and lets himself face Eddie and there's a brief moment. Eddie's mouth almost imperceptibly twitches up at the corners. Richie's moving toward him. He places the hand that's not clinging to Eddie's like a lifeline on the other boy's neck. His fingers brush his jaw slightly and Richie's mind is made up. He's going to kiss Eddie. He's going to have his first kiss right now and it's going to be with Eddie and it's going to change everything and maybe that's okay. *Cause I'd already know.*

Stan comes pounding up the steps shouting about how it's a little tough to carry enough snacks for four people alone and the toilet flushes in the next room. They're coming back. The moment's over. Eddie's right hand, which had wandered up to Richie's chest atop his heart- when had it done *that*- forcefully pushes Richie up and off and he's flying through time.

Bev is reaching out and pushing him as she laughs at the Chinese restaurant the other night.

Bill pushes him to the ground in the middle of the street after Neibolt the first time.

Ben's pushing him off, annoyed by the sloppy kissing sounds he's making around his head like the little pest he is.

Mike pushes himself in the middle of Richie and Bill, draping his arms over their shoulders easily.

Stan, seated on Mike's shoulders, pushes hard and knocks Richie off of Ben's, sending him splashing into the quarry.

Eddie's pushing him up against the wall. Their hips are pressed together. He's thrown by how close to the edge he is already. He needs Eddie so much closer.

Everything's moving faster now. Richie feels like he's spinning. He's falling. He's flying. If this is his life flashing before his eyes, he's disappointed. There's so much less Eddie than there should be. That's how he knows he's not dying. If he were, Eddie would be his every thought.

Eddie's teasing him, knowing well that he holds the reins. "Don't push your luck." But he will. He will push his luck every time. "You're pushing it, Tozier." It's Stan, now. He's asked a favor and interrupted Stan's reading and what Stan doesn't know is that it's because he, Eddie, and Mike are taking him out for his birthday. They haven't forgotten it.

He's dancing around the clubhouse with Ben. "P-Push it real good." The other Losers are staring and they don't care.

Bill is talking him down off the proverbial ledge. They start school next week and how are they supposed to do any of that while they've seen what they've seen. "We'll just have to keep pushing through."

Bev's staring at him with watery eyes. "Stop pushing me away, Trashmouth," she pleads. She's leaving and it hurts and, God, why does everything have to fucking *hurt* .

"God, you're pushing every one of my buttons tonight, Richie." Mike's rolling his eyes. Richie had made a joke that should have earned him a beep, but instead, Mike seems actually bothered. Maybe there are consequences. He'll have to apologize.

The warm light turns cold. It's dark. It's damp. It's miserable. It's here.

Richie watches, paralyzed, as Eddie is impaled on Its leg.

He can't move to tell Bev that the roof is caving in and she needs to run before she's buried under 10 feet of rock.

There's no helping Bill as It unhinges Its jaw and swallows Bill whole, telling him he'll be reunited with Georgie.

Ben is slammed against the cavern wall, head first, and Richie can't stop it.

The water surges as they try to escape and It claims Mike, dragging his body below and never to be seen again.

He's running beside Stan out of the house on Neibolt and, as it comes crumbling down, so too does Stan, clutching his chest and the light goes from his eyes.

Richie watches as they cover Stan with a white sheet and take him away.

He takes off at a run. His feet carry him for three steps and he's at the ledge over the quarry. He thinks about how you have to put some power in to make it to the deeper parts of the water if you don't want to die. He takes a baby step off the edge and meets the water.

It doesn't hurt. Why doesn't it hurt?

Eddie and Stan skidded to a stop at the mouth of the tunnel where Richie had sped off just moments before. Eddie's stomach dropped through the floor at the sight of Richie, slack-jawed and blank-eyed, just as Bev had been all those years before. "Richie!" he screamed.

Gripping his wrist to hold Eddie back, Stan's mind reeled. "Shit," he hissed, pulling them back out of sight. Eddie broke loose of his grasp and rolled the fencepost Bev had given him in his hand cautiously. He had to do something.

In the span of the minute Richie was floating, Eddie mustered up all of his courage. "This kills monsters if you believe it does. If you believe it does," he repeated to himself over and over. He pulled his headlamp down onto his forehead and turned it on before flinging himself out of the tunnel and launching the spear with an echoing "Beep beep, motherfucker!"

Richie came dropping to the ground with a sickening crunch. Eddie rushed to his side. "Richie," he called, shaking his shoulders. Concerned when he didn't rouse, he thought back to what had brought Bev out of the deadlights. He cupped Richie's face in his hands and kissed him with abandon. Nothing. "Richie, come on. You gotta wake up!" He sat back on his heels, trying to come up with his next move. He refused to shed a tear. This wasn't the end. Absolutely

not. After a moment, Richie's eyes snapped open, accompanied by a sharp intake of breath. "There we go," he cheered, crawling atop his flustered partner and placing his palms flat on his chest. "I killed It! I-I-I think I killed It for real. It's-"

"Move," Richie said, voice scarcely above a whisper. His eyes searched Eddie frantically, piecing the whole thing together. The deadlights. The chest wound. He brought his hands up Eddie's thighs to his waist and gave him a shove.

Not understanding, Eddie whimpered, "Richie-"

Voice more sure in his throat, he said again, "Move!" He shoved against Eddie and got him out of the position they'd been in. Panting from the sudden exertion, he stopped short, all breath sucked from his lungs, as the pincer still went through Eddie's abdomen. But it was different than before. It wasn't his chest. It was lower. He hadn't been thrown as far. "Eds!" he screamed following the trajectory into a nearby tunnel.

Bev's scream came next as the losers poured into the space behind him. Then Bill, and Mike, both releasing guttural shouts. Stan slid in front of Ben and they were all there, staring down at Eddie, sprawled across the ground, teeth clenched, pale, losing blood. *So much blood.*

Richie stripped off his jacket and pressed it to the wound. *Gotta stop the bleeding. Stop the bleeding.*

"Come out and play, Losers!" Pennywise goaded from above.

Paying It no mind, Richie looked pleadingly at the Losers. "Guys, he's... he's hurt really bad." He pressed the jacket down harder, momentarily remembering the futility of it since the wound was on the other side as well. They were running out of time. "We... We gotta get him out of here."

But It was still out there. They hadn't won yet. It was thrashing about the cavern, throwing a colossal temper tantrum. Every blow shook the walls and Bev flinched along with a particularly strong one. "How are we supposed to do that, Richie?" she asked.

He ignored her. "Eds? Hey," he said gently, trailing the backside of his hand down his cheek. "Hey, babe, you gotta stay with me." He grasped his cheeks and shook. Eddie's eyes lifted open just a little and Richie's heart fluttered. "Eds, look at me." Doing as he was told, Eddie looked up at a space somewhere past Richie. He took a rattling breath and coughed. Black blood poured out. *Wanna play loogie?* "Shit. Okay, you're okay," he lied, voice trembling. "You're gonna be okay," he amended. He was *going* to be okay. He *had* to be.

The other 5 Losers stood huddled by Eddie's feet. The space was small but felt even smaller as they realized how much time they were wasting.

"Okay," Eddie agreed. He looked up at Richie, searching for the words he wanted. He was so sure. *He was so sure.* "I thought I had It."

Nodding as he blinked back tears, Richie sank to his knees beside him. "You did. We just gotta..." he looked up, trying to figure out what they just had to do. Get him out, *sure*, but fucking *how*?

Taking a deep breath that was about as satisfying as a saltine after a workout, he groaned, gripping at the edge of Richie's shirt. "It seemed so small. When..." He looked up at Stan because Richie's newly broken sobs weren't something he could handle. "When it was in my house, it..." he struggled for the wording. His mind was swimming. He was finding it harder and harder to find things to cling to. Except Richie. He could cling to Richie. "I had my hands around its throat and it was like... It was like It was shrinking the bigger I felt."

There was a moment of tense silence as the realization sunk in. "The laws of the shape it inhabits!" Mike repeated, looking over at Bill. "We have to make it small!" Bill nodded silently but didn't seem to have a plan.

"How do we do that, Mike?" Bev asked, leaning back against the wall as more debris fell. They were running out of time.

Ben's mind blinked back to when they were coming in. He'd hardly been able to get his shoulders through. Bev, Bill, and Eddie were even

confined tightly. That was it. "The tunnel." Confused silence. "It was so small we could hardly get through. If we make It go through..."

Recognition washed over Stan. "It'll shrink back down to size." He thought it over. It could work. It could. It seemed too easy, but if that was the answer, it was possible.

Richie nodded, then looked down to Eddie. "Ok. We're gonna move now, okay?" Eddie nodded, not really listening. "We're gonna get you up now, Eds. On three," he looked up at Bill and nodded him wordlessly to his side. Slowly, he gave the three count and they were off.

They moved fairly quickly, all things considered. Both men took the hands that weren't supporting Eddie and held Richie's jacket against the wound on the front, Stan's sweater against the one on his back. Their movements were as steady as they could. Every groan from Eddie made Richie's heart skip a beat.

From ahead, Mike called back, "Okay, through here!" Stan glanced back and waited for the huddled group in case they needed more help.

"I gotta rest," Eddie said, pointing to a wall with his head. "Gotta..." Richie and Bill eased him to the floor, Stan helping to straighten out his legs before tugging Bill to the center of the room where the Losers were suddenly otherwise occupied. He hissed in pain and closed his eyes.

Richie wouldn't let that happen. "Hey, babe, look at me, okay?" Eddie obliged. Everything hurt and he knew what was happening, but if Richie was going to ignore it, then he'd do his best to play along. It was going to be so much harder for Richie in a couple of minutes, anyway. He focused on his shallow breaths as Richie coached him. "We've done this all before. Just look at me."

He gave a soft smile. "Nowhere else I'd rather look," he said. He reached for Richie's hand but missed, grabbing his waist instead.

A soft laugh escaped Richie's lips, despite himself. "Fuck, you're really out of it, aren't you?" Eddie opened his mouth to argue, but

Richie kissed him instead. It was soft and gentle and Richie tried not to notice the slick blood that clung to his lips when he came back up. "Okay, save your breath, babe. No need to stress out those bum lungs, huh?"

Eddie noticed the blood, though. He thumbed over Richie's lips and wiped the traces away as best he could. "Not bum lungs," he corrected. *I'm dying, Richie. I'm dying. This isn't a panic attack disguised as asthma. This is real.* But he would never say that. He couldn't be cruel to Richie. Not now. Not ever. But especially not now. When it was over for him, it would be over. Richie would have to get up and go on. He felt Richie shift, watching the Losers fighting Pennywise in the distance. They could wait a few more minutes. It wouldn't be long, he could tell. He needed Richie by his side until the end. "Don't leave me, okay? Not until I'm..." *gone*, his brain wanted to supply, but instead gave him, "asleep." *To die by your side is such a heavenly way to die.*

Richie protested. That wasn't going to work. "No sleeping. Hey, stay awake! Look at me!" he pleaded.

Eddie felt himself slipping and he was in a hospital bed. It was 27 years earlier. His cast had come off and, in that same visit, his mother had somehow managed to parlay it into another hospital stay. She swore to the doctors he was sick, that he'd lost his throat, that his tonsils were infected. The doctor looked at him with sympathy but agreed to take them out. Eddie groaned. He didn't need them anyway, so just *fucking take them.*

After the surgery, he realized, it was the best thing that could have happened. His mother, distraught by seeing him in a hospital bed, fled from the room. She'd somehow given him an entire 48 hours free of her. Unfortunately, that meant he was alone.

Which he hated.

Especially, he realized, since they'd defeated It and the nightmares had started. It was pathetic. He wasn't a baby. Nightmares were for babies. Granted, most people didn't have the experiences he'd had that summer, but still. *What the fuck?* Richie didn't have nightmares. Or at least, he didn't think he did. Would he have told

him if he did?

He was beginning to freak out when he heard a hushed, familiar voice from the doorway, accompanied by the rustling of plastic bags. "Hey there, Spaghetti head!"

Richie.

Eddie couldn't help but smile. "Hey," he croaked. "What are you doing here?"

Boundless energy radiating from him, complete with a notably forced smile, "Keeping you company, dipshit." He settled into the chair by his bedside and propped his feet up on the bed, dropping the bags to the mattress.

"How'd you get in here?" he asked.

Eyebrows wiggling up over his glasses, Richie licked his lips. "Used my worldly wiles." Eddie blushed, causing Richie to stifle a laugh, nudging his thigh with his foot. "How'd you think? I found someone who'd seem sympathetic to the fact that your mother couldn't be bothered to stay and that I didn't want you to be alone." The forced smile faltered, and for the first time he could remember, Eddie noticed that Richie didn't turn it into a dirty joke at his mother's expense. He must have been really pissed about that. "And, I brought you the good shit," he said, pulling two pints of ice cream out of the bag, along with a couple of new comics, a legal pad and a pack of pens, and Eddie's walkman, which Richie must have snuck into his room to get, with two new mixtapes. He smiled back at his best friend and crossed his ankles, pulling the container of Peanut Butter Banana Fudge Marshmallow, which Eddie had affectionately nicknamed the Elvis Upchuck, into his lap. "So, what are we watching?" he asked, gesturing up at the fuzzy hospital tv.

Switching it over to Nickelodeon, Eddie dug into his Neopolitan happily, enjoying the company, even if he had to pass notes when he wanted to talk. The hours ticked on and the intercom called out that visiting hours were over. Richie frowned but stood up, collecting the evidence of his visit back into the bags and plotting how he was going to leave and sneak back in.

For reasons he still wasn't ready to pinpoint, Eddie felt his heart drop. "Don't leave me, okay?" he asked, balling up a scrap paper and tossing it at him to make sure he was aware that he was talking. "At least not until I fall asleep?"

Richie shook his head fondly. "Don't talk asshole," he said, moving the bags to the floor, and dismissing his original intent. "I'm not going anywhere. But, you're gonna have to scoot over. I'm not sleeping in that chair." Eddie obliged, moving over and making room for Richie, just like he did at home. When they got comfortable, Richie snaked his arm around Eddie. "You don't honestly think I would leave, do you?" Eddie shrugged, trying not to feel guilty. Why *wouldn't* he? Richie rested his head atop Eddie's, uncharacteristically softly. "I'd never leave you," he said earnestly. Eddie went for years chalking that moment up to his being tired and their recent trauma.

Little did he know, it was the first time Richie was really, honestly coming to grips with the way he felt about Eddie. He loved him and the most important thing to him was making sure that he was okay. There was nothing selfish. Just pure, unadulterated love.

Love that would carry over the next 27 years, to California and all the way back to Derry. Back to Derry where five Losers stood hurling insults at their childhood nightmare, shrinking it down to size.

"Weak piece of shit!" Stan screamed at It, charging ahead. "What good are you?"

Ben, close behind, yelled out "Mimic!"

At a loss, Bev shot out the first thing she could think. "Clown!"

"Bully!" Bill accused.

The behemoth clown roared. "Eater of worlds!" He jabbed a leg at them but was shrinking so rapidly, there was no point.

From across the chamber, Richie screamed, "Dude, are you kidding me?" Eddie reached for his hand, but found himself, instead, tugging on his jacket. "Not even eater of my asshole, numbnuts."

It was dark now. Even though Eddie knew the deadlights were still

there, he could hardly see. “Richie-”

“We kicked your ass into hibernation before we even started shaving!” They could hear Stan giving it to him. Good, Richie thought. He couldn’t imagine how they’d do this without Stan. “You think we’re afraid of you now, jackass? Lazy motherfucker!”

“Rip him apart, guys!” Richie cheered, clasping Eddie’s hand tightly in his hand that wasn’t still applying pressure. “Tear his fucking heart out!”

Eddie called out again. “Richie-”

“What’s up, babe?” he asked, trying to keep his tone light as he turned back to him. He reached up and gently caressed Eddie’s cheek.

Eddie’s focus was out the window. He could only think to say one thing. “I love you.”

That caught Richie’s whole, undivided attention. “Woah. No, no, no, no, no,” he urged, bringing Eddie’s hand to his chest, as though feeling his heartbeat would motivate his to keep beating. “Stay with me, babe. Hey,” he said, gentle voice beginning to break into desperation.

“I’m not gonna-” make it, Eddie wanted to say, but he couldn’t find the energy to do it. He just wanted to be able to see Richie in front of him. His bright eyes magnified beneath his still-too-thick glasses. His floppy hair which he refused to cut. His ugly patterned shirt. His sneaky grin and strong, stubbled jaw. His broad shoulders and the arms that held him so many nights, the hand that should have worn a wedding band the day they passed Prop 8... All of him. At least he could find comfort in knowing that there was still an image of Richie in his mind. He worried, though, how long would it be before no one had a mental image of him anymore. What would last? What would fade? He didn’t really want to think about it, but all he could hear in his head was *what will fade?*

The question rolling in his head almost blocked out Richie’s voice. Almost. He could only imagine the fear and heartbreak in his eyes.

Eddie was glad he didn't have to see that heartbreak firsthand. He couldn't imagine if the last expression he saw on Richie's face was the one where he realized that he was dying. The strain in his voice made it fairly evident that he was just about there. "I love you, but I'm not gonna say it until we get out of here, okay?" He felt Richie's strong hands on his shoulders and he smiled, or at least he thought he did. "You don't get to say 'I love you' and make it sound like goodbye." Richie shook him a little. "Okay, no, you have to stay awake." Eddie wanted to laugh and tell Richie it wasn't a movie. He wanted to ask if Bill was feeding him lines. He wanted to *anything* .

Richie heard the Losers screaming his name and crumpled. They needed him. He knew he could help them. Eddie, he wasn't so sure. But he was sure that he wasn't going to leave him here alone. Bev yelled for him again. "Fuck!" he hissed. "Babe, they need..." He looked over at them and made up his mind. *It's not a movie* , he thought. *I 'm not going to get another chance with Eddie. My input isn't going to make that big of a difference. Not while he still has a pulse.* "I'm not going anywhere. I'm right here, I'm just kneeling up, and I'm gonna yell so be ready for that," he said, earning him no response. "I won't let go of your hand, I promise. I'm right here, babe." He didn't know what else to do, so he shouted his own insults, watching the face morph between all of the forms he'd seen or heard about over the years in rapid succession. Before he knew it, Mike had reached into the center of Its chest and ripped Its heart out. *Fuck, I didn't mean it literally*, he thought. The Losers piled their hands in one by one and crushed the black heart and it began to crumble and float. Because *of course*, it did. They stood, shellshocked, over the spot where they'd begun their ritual and realized that it was over- They'd won. He could see different reactions of relief and turned to the man at his side. "Eddie-" No response. Eyes wide and unblinking, there was nothing. Richie thought he might throw up. No no, no, no, no, he thought, hands shaking as he reached out to touch. "Eds, we did it. We got Pennywise. It's..." he leaned down, sweeping him up into his arms. "Eddie?"

Closing in ranks behind him, the Losers stood around as the cave began to tremble. Stan's heart broke. He knelt beside his best friend, the one who'd worked him through fits and flares that were way beyond his paygrade, and wanted only to help him. He palmed his

back, whispering "Richie," as gently as he could to get his attention.

Beside them, Mike crouched down and mirrored Stan's action. "Eddie's gone, man," he said, trying to banish the tears from his face.

"No, he's not. He's just hurt," Richie insisted. "H-h-he... he..." he curled his fingers around his wrist and checked. "He still has a pulse." He held out a hand under his nose. "He's breathing. It's shallow, but it's there." He tried to hoist him up onto his shoulder, but he needed help, at least to get him started. "We gotta get him out of here." The Losers, all in tears, looked down at him sympathetically. He couldn't understand their pace. "Ben?" He asked, but the man simply curled Bev in tighter against him. He turned to the man beside him, the only one who knew. "Stan. Stan, I'm not leaving him here." The thought rattled him and he began to hyperventilate. "I'm not. I won't." Leaning down, Bev placed a hand on his shoulder. Richie shook his head. "Bev, he's okay. We need to get him out of here," he insisted.

She crouched beside him, looking up at the crumbling ceiling. They were running out of time. "Richie—"

"What?" he snapped.

"Honey... He may have a pulse but," she searched for the words, finally settling on "he's dead. He's..." The look of betrayal on Richie's face was so unbelievably clear, she instantly regretted her word choice, circling back to, "We can't save him. We have to get out of here."

Bill interjected, trying to stop Beverly from digging her own grave. "He'd want you t-t-t-to—"

Richie stood, turning to face them, "You don't know what the fuck he'd want! What he wouldn't want is to be left behind." He went to squeeze Eddie's hand encouragingly but realized he'd let go when he stood up. He knelt back down, rubbing his hand up and down the man's arm. "What he wouldn't want is for us to give up on him. I won't give up on him." He looked back at the Losers imploringly. "Not ever," he insisted.

Mike looked around, then closed his eyes. "Our best shot is-"

"If you leave Eddie, you're leaving me, too."

If not for the crumbling of the walls around them, there would have been no sound. The Losers looked amongst themselves. Some clearly didn't buy it, for one reason or another. Stan rocked back on his heels. He was not letting Richie die down here and he wasn't particularly interested in leaving Eddie. Bill saw something too close to home in Richie's panic. If there was a way, they had to find it. The rest were heartbroken, but they didn't see a way.

"Richie, be reasonable," Bev said quietly, as the ceiling groaned, dropping rocks too close to the group for comfort. "Look, honey, the whole place is coming down."

"Then it'll be quick for us both," he said. His tone was final. *Eddie was nearly killed!* Yeah, he was not doing this.

Mike reached out a hand to try to lift him up. "Richie--"

Determination is a funny thing. He smacked Mike's hand away and clenched his teeth. "What are you gonna do, Mike? Fucking drag me?" He threw his hands up dramatically. "It seems that that energy would be better spent carrying Eddie, giving him his best fucking shot, when I *can* walk on my own." They all looked at him carefully. He was right. It was very seldom that Richie wasn't right when he actually moved to voice an idea that wasn't laced in a dirty joke. Even a lot of those had insight buried beneath. "Either way," he assessed, "you're carrying one of us. I think the one who won't fight you every step of the way might be the one you want."

Stan nodded. "Okay, Rich. Come on, we'll get him up," he pulled Richie to his feet and straightened his shoulders. "Ben, think you can make it up the hatch with him on you?" Stan asked, more as a formality, because, *duh* . Not only could he, but he didn't have much choice. It was the nice way of saying *you're doing it and you have to be fine with that* .

"Yeah. Yeah, I can," he acquiesced.

"Good. Rich," Stan said calling attention to the plan, "you and I will get him there, Ben will get him up, and you and I will get him out, okay?" Richie nodded. "We won't leave him, but we have to go now. You ready?"

Before they could move, Richie wrapped Stan in a nearly-suffocating hug. "Thank you." He wanted to say so much more, but that was all his brain could come up with.

"Thank me when we get out of here, dude," Stan said, puffing out an unamused laugh. He shooed the rest of the Losers except Ben on ahead and locked eyes with Richie. "On my count, okay?" The taller man nodded and Stan gave a three-point countdown. He leaned forward and, with Richie on the other side, they managed to get Eddie to his feet. There wasn't much assistance on his part, but he seemed to be floating in and out of consciousness.

They raced through the tunnels. Richie and Stan did their best to keep the wound out of the greywater. *You ever heard of a staph infection?* Determination, Richie found, was a worthy distraction. He found that his mind settled on one task: get Eddie out. Normally, Eddie was the one with the bizarrely innate sense of direction. Somehow, entwined by fate or love or just an extreme sense of familiarity, it was like Richie had his voice in his ear guiding them out, guiding them *home*.

When they reached the hatch, they carefully handed Eddie over to Ben "Rich-" he moaned, clinging as tightly to him as he could. Ben hardly noticed the extra weight.

Ben was startled by the sound as he started working his way up the tunnel, He leaned his head back, speaking softly, calmly. "No, man, just Ben. Rich is right in front of us."

But Eddie was in a world of his own. He snuggled against Ben's neck. "Richie, I wanna go home." He sounded so small. So weak. Ben pulled himself up a little harder.

"I know, Eds. We'll get you home," he said moving as fast as he could. He groaned, leaning into the effort. "Just gotta get out of here first."

His head lolled to the side and he pressed his lips to the curve of Ben's neck in what was likely supposed to be a kiss, whispering "I love you, Rich." Ben nearly lost his grip and sent them both plummeting to square one. What was *that* about? "I need you to know that I love you."

"Shit," Ben hissed. He knew it was too jarring for Eddie, but he tried to cut himself some slack. He didn't know what to do with that information. Did Richie know?

"Come to bed, Rich. It's cold. I'm s-s-s-so cold," he stammered, body beginning to shiver. He hadn't shivered that much since two winters before he and Richie moved down to LA.

Eddie kicked his work shoes off at the door, hung up his coat, shoved his hat, scarf, and mittens into the pocket before crossing to where Richie was seated at the kitchen table, working on some new material for his weekend gig at a new club in Oakland called All Out. Richie had finished his communications degree quickly. Eddie, however, struggled a little to find his footing. He'd started out pre-med, intending to be a doctor, but gave up, realizing that he didn't want to be in school for the rest of his twenties. He started slow, eventually settling into economics while still picking up a job at a northwest coffee chain that was starting to take off, even if he hated that they called the staff baristas. How *pretentious*. If nothing else, it kept them in coffee even when they were broke. Which was a lot of the time.

He shrugged out of the ugly green apron with the stupid mermaid and chucked it on the table, to be hung up later... maybe... then pressed his hands to Richie's neck. "Jesus!" he exclaimed, nearly jumping out of his skin at the sudden change of temperature, but was quieted by the gentle kiss on the cheek.

"I told you! It's freezing," he said, laughing as he zipped into the bedroom.

Richie laughed, too. He was too in love to actually be mad. "And I don't want your ice cube paws on my neck, you little goblin," he said, shivering the last of the chill off. "What are you, five?"

Eddie tossed his clothes into the hamper with an exaggerated shiver. He had pulled out a pair of thick flannel pajama bottoms and one of Richie's old, ratty sweatshirts, then decided against it. He paused and stuck his head around the corner. "36°. 36° and they still made me work the fucking window." He returned to the bed and curled in, a hint of mischief and a different plan for warming up hatching in his mind.

He hated that that was the case, but knew there wasn't much more to be done. At least Eddie was super close to graduating and he already had offers lined up. "I'm sorry, babe. It won't be long, though. Once you graduate, there's a world full of boring desk jobs waiting for you," he said, knowing that helping to keep his eye on the prize sometimes calmed him, but still there was one more thing... "complete with central heating."

Sighing dreamily and snuggling under the duvet, Eddie sighed dreamily, "Central heating." Still, the dream of it wasn't quite warm enough. "Hey sweetie-"

Sweetie . Richie milled it over, then frowned. "No."

Eddie snorted a laugh. "No? You don't even know what I'm asking!" He should have known it wasn't going to be that easy.

Continuing to scratch out notes into a black marble notebook, he clarified, "No, I'm vetoing sweetie."

Outraged, Eddie fidgets with his posture deciding just how much of his upper body he wanted to have above the cover. "You call me all sorts of ridiculous names I don't like."

"You love them," he called in an annoying singsong.

Eddie smiled, grateful that Richie couldn't see his "Do not."

"Except..." he said, leaving a big enough gap that Eddie thought maybe, just maybe, he'd seen the light and would give up, "you do."
No such luck.

Groaning audibly, he gave in, making a point of elongating every syllable. "Okay, Richard..."

“What's up?” Richie asked, laughter painting his tone.

“Come to bed,” he urged, deciding instead to pull the covers up to his neck. If Richie made him wait any longer, his nipples were going to freeze off.

Richie looked up at the clock- a Kit Cat, of course, no matter how much Eddie had griped when they found it at a garage sale and Richie insisted that they needed it. “Babe, it's only 10,” he said, shocked that he'd been sitting in the same position for the better part of six hours. Had he done anything else since he got home? He cursed his fucking memory and slid the chair out, closing his notebook for the night.

“It's cold,” he whined. “*I'm cold.*”

“So I've heard,” Richie placated as he moved around the living room, putting away odds and ends that had been left out.

Hearing the shuffling of Richie's nightly sweep of the room, he smiled, prompting. “You know what helps survival scenarios in cases of hypothermia?”

He leaned against the doorframe, looking at the bundle of covers using Eddie's voice. “You're *not hypothermic.* ” A little voice in Richie's head said *a hypochondriac, maybe*, but he decided better of it. Besides, Eddie had gotten so much better about it since the... gazebo. Gazebo? There must have been an incident at the park. Probably something with bees...

Eddie arched one eyebrow, waiting for him to put the pieces together. “Skin to skin contact.” Richie looked up, pressing his whole body weight into his arms. Eddie eyed the defined lines along his arms carefully, adding a low, “Sharing body heat.”

Tongue feeling heavy in his mouth, Richie moved into their bedroom, tugging his shirt off over his head quickly and easily. “Is that so?” he teased, stripping the comforter off the bed to see exactly what Eddie had been getting at. His boyfriend was stark naked in their bed and he was suddenly very grateful for this ridiculous cold snap.

"It is," Eddie confirmed, reaching out and hooking one finger into the waistband of Richie's pants, pulling him down onto the bed with him. "And you are definitely hot enough that you could share with a poor, desperate soul," he pouted.

Ego inflated like a hot air balloon, Richie was almost purring. "Am I?" he asked, hovering a breath above Eddie. He raked his fingers back through the man's windswept hair and leaned down to kiss him.

Flush against him, Eddie began to feel warm all over. Definitely hot. "You are," he breathed between long, soft kisses and that was all it took to strike a fire in his belly, enough to last all night.

The next morning, all Richie could think was that it was a good thing they'd gone to bed at ten because if they'd started later, they'd never have gotten any sleep.

Sleep and Richie were, in that moment some 14 years later, all Eddie wanted. Truthfully, a lot of time in the in-between was spent wanting more of one or the other. He was lucky enough that both of those things typically coincided.

Unaware of the memory Eddie was reliving, Ben's heart broke. He knew cold wasn't good. He handed the man back to Richie and Stan. He gently placed Eddie's hand on Richie's shoulder and rubbed it. "Here's Richie, Eds." Sheepishly, he locked eyes with him, realizing he *had* to know. More than that, he felt the same way. It made sense. Everything clicked into place. The desperation in his begging to get Eddie out. He could see something so familiar in him. *Love*. "He was asking for you. You were right man. He's hanging on for you." He petted Eddie's hair gently as they started walking through the house on Neibolt. "Keep talking to him."

Realizing that getting Eddie to a hospital meant transportation, Stan dug his keys out of his pocket and looked for the nearest person. "Mike, when we get up to the street, my rental is out there," he tossed them to him. "Pull it up front."

Catching them with ease, he took off for the front door, calling, "You got it," over his shoulder to them.

Quicker than anyone would have realized possible, especially with the house caving in around them, they made it out. Stan and Richie loaded Eddie into the backseat of the car as Ben called after, “Go. Go, we’ll catch up!” Richie slid in beside Eddie and continued to talk to him, inaudibly.

From the front seat, Mike continued to occasionally steal glimpses back at the pair. *Roommates, my ass.* “Is there something you’re not telling us, Rich?”

Richie didn’t really hear him and instead, asked a weak, “What?”

“Is there a particular reason for this?” he asked. It was intimate, and Richie was broken up about it. They lived together, they hadn’t forgotten about each other. They’d always been close, but...

“You would have just left him down there?” Richie snapped. He’d had more than enough of this bullshit. “He still has a pulse. It’s faint, but it’s there,” he said, resting his fingers gently on Eddie’s neck, then his wrist before returning to comforting him, having tuned Mike out indefinitely.

“I know, man. I know,” he said, realizing it wasn’t the right time, but he had to know. It felt familiar. Like how he’d feel if... “I just...”

“You’re bugging him about this now?” Stan argued. “Fuck, man, focus on your own unresolved shit.” Mike’s jaw clamped shut as though he’d been slapped. He snaked a hand back between the seats to grip Eddie’s thigh. “We’re going, Eddie. Just hold on, okay. Hold on.” Looking out the back window, he saw that the house on the corner of Neibolt street was gone, having sunk into the Earth below.

Notes for the Chapter:

Happy Thanksgiving, all!

I'm thankful for each and every one of you.

8. So I'll Go Sit On The Floor Wearing Your Clothes

Summary for the Chapter:

The Losers get Eddie to the hospital and Richie has to deal with what his life might look like if Eddie dies.

The entire ride to Derry Gen was over before Richie was even aware that it had started. In the backseat, all he could see was Eddie. Making sure he was still breathing. Keeping pressure on the wound. Feeling for a pulse. Talking to Eddie, just to try to see if he'd regain consciousness like he had in Ben's arms on the way up out of the house on Neibolt.

No such luck.

By the time they reached the emergency entrance, the men flew into action. Stan ran inside and got them to bring someone out to the curb with a stretcher, Mike moved immediately to the back door and lifted Eddie out as Richie slid him closer to him. They, along with two nurses, moved quickly through the halls. Then two nurses became six and two doctors.

And the hand Richie hadn't realized was still clinging to Eddie's was pushed aside. Unceremoniously, one of the nurses swept Stan, Mike, and Richie out into the hallway and closed the door.

The rest of the Losers weren't far behind, raining down upon the unsuspecting hospital in a storm of panic and disarray. They rushed to the three still standing outside the door and hugged them together tightly.

An hour passed. Then two. The group had moved into the uncomfortable plastic waiting room chairs and did just that. They waited. Time ticked on. A laboring mom came in as the TV in the corner played the local news. A group of drunks brought in their friend who'd passed out just as Jimmy Fallon morphed into Seth Meyers. That's it. Other than that, they were left alone.

It was strange. After three days of reconnecting with people he didn't realize he'd missed, he didn't want to talk to any of them. It appeared that no one did. Bill stayed next to the vending machines. He caught himself staring, more than once, at the faces scattered around the room and wanted to say something, but for the first time in his life, the writer had no words. Ben curled up near a window. Bev sat at the opposite end of the row from Ben. Occasionally, she'd glance up, but she couldn't focus on him for long. She felt too guilty. Eventually, she wordlessly escaped to the Ladies' Room for a less oppressive brand of quiet. Stan was under the TV, absorbing the sound but not hearing it. Mike stood in the corner closest to the nurse's station. He couldn't bring himself to sit; not when Richie wouldn't. It wasn't that Richie wouldn't sit- he *would* have, honest. But he just... he couldn't sit still. He started in the middle, then paced around the lounge. He sat closest to the entryway, body twisted so he could still see the door. Eventually, he decided he couldn't do it anymore. He got up and paced the waiting room once more. Then, the hallway. Finally, in a burst of bravery, he reached out for the doorknob at the room where they still had Eddie. He just needed to see... Needed to know.

If Eddie was okay. If he was still alive. If he was still fighting.

If he was well and truly *alone* for the first time in his life.

He didn't have the chance to open it. The door opened, revealing the first nurse who'd come out to them with the stretcher, a clipboard in hand. "If you're not family, Mr. Tozier, I'm going to have to ask you to stay in the waiting room," she said. Her tone was short. Curt, even.

Blocking her path with as much of his frame as he could, he balled his fists on his hips, squinting at the tiny blonde in disbelief. "We've been living together since we were eighteen fucking years old. I'm as close to family as you're going to find," he explained, offense clear on his face.

"Are you his brother?" she asked, lifting her eyebrows, unimpressed with his posturing.

Richie spluttered. "No, I-"

“Father?” she asked, earning a scoff. She looked down at her clipboard for the checkboxes on her paper. “Son?” A huff. She looked at the last box on the relationship to the patient section before taking a self-satisfied glance at Richie’s left hand. “Husband?”

Floored that that fucking piece of paper was actually what was going to keep him from being with him, Richie answered, “Might as well be,” and tried to move around her. He needed to be with him. If anything happened and he wasn’t there...

“Unfortunately,” she said, backing herself in between Richie and the door, the nurse closed the door behind her. With her smug little button nose upturned and too-pink-for-work lips curled up into a bitchy little grin, she shook her head. “I don’t have a box for ‘might as well be.’ *That’s* not the type of *relationship* we mean,” she sneered.

Oh.

Oh .

Richie took a step back, smarted by the realization that that’s what this was about. Gathering his courage- they’d just bullied a clown to death for fuck’s sake- Richie spat back, amping up the gay for effect. “I’m his partner,” he started, head wagging a little. “I’ve been his emergency contact since we literally ran away from home together 20 fucking years ago.” He eyes narrowed and he crossed his arms, leaning in conspiratorially, like telling her a secret she really didn’t want to know. “We haven’t so much as slept in different beds for more than a night at a time, months and months apart for decades and you’re telling me that I can’t sit with him.” He gestured to the door. “The man I’ve been in love with for my entire fucking life could be dying and I can’t be there to hold his hand?” His voice cracked traitorously, showing his desperation for what it was. “In an ER 3000 fucking miles from home?” He was yelling now, a little- *more than a little, okay* - and didn’t notice the two separate pairs of footsteps coming from behind him.

She simply batted her eyes at him sarcastically, in much the same lightly soulless face you’d see on a retail employee getting reamed by an old lady for not having her size. “They’re taking him in for surgery as soon as the room turns over.” She said, feigning her innocence in

the matter. Every moment the door was closed was another moment Mrs. Kaspbrak's voice looped in Richie's head, further amplifying his annoyance. *Eddie is done with you! Do you hear? Done!* Unaware of the exterior reasons, the young woman held her ground, never once feeling that, perhaps, the concessions she'd made for the drunk kid's girlfriend two doors down may have heightened his reaction. "Go back to your hotel and get cleaned up. We'll call," she said flatly, eyeing him down.

"Fuck that! Listen, Tinkerbell," Richie spat, having had quite enough of her lack of empathy, "I'm going to stay with my fucking partner!" He moved like he was getting through the door, no matter what. If he had to move heaven, earth, hell, high water, and everything else that came in his way, he would. This little brat didn't even register on the list of extremes.

Bev threw her arm across Richie, her own determination almost rivaling his own. "Woah. Richie-" A strong arm had slid around his middle, more effectively restraining him.

"Tinkerbell coming from a *fairy* . Nice," the nurse laughed.

The voice connected to the arm- Mike, apparently- called out to the girl. "Hey, great bedside manners. Is Janine around?" He dropped the now calmer Richie and stepped around him, folding his arms. The nurse spluttered a few times. She hadn't thought that this group of blood-soaked, filthy people might have a connection to her boss, of all people.

Richie turned to Mike and nodded gratefully. As he moved away, Bev stepped into the space he'd previously occupied. Her expression was soft, patient, but he didn't want any part of it. "Not now, Bev," he groaned. She never looked away from him. "You heard what you heard just now, just like you heard what you heard in the..." Richie was suddenly acutely aware of their location and the likelihood of any or all of them being patients for the next three days too if they talked too loudly about the events of the last three. Somewhere in his brain, a guilty voice rang out, reminding him of Stan's suggestion that they stay away from cops and hospitals and *fuck* if that wasn't *exactly* where they'd wound up. He glanced around, lowering his voice as he continued "back there, and I don't really want to talk

about it." He turned around and started to walk away, meaning to find Stan.

Unwilling to let him get away that easy, Bev caught up quickly and grabbed him by the wrist. "Hey, come here," she urged, pulling him back to her.

He dislodged her quickly. *We can't save him. Richie, be reasonable.* He couldn't even look at her. "No. You wanted to just leave him there."

"Richie-"

"Don't," he snapped. When Bev jumped back, clearly startled by his tone, he softened a little. "Just *don't*. Not right now," he pled. She'd never seen him so sad; so *serious*. "Not until he's okay. Honestly, Bev, maybe not even then." He started moving again, this time turning down a hallway. He really just wanted to be alone. No. He *really* wanted this to be some sort of ridiculous nightmare and he'd wake up in his bed with Eddie curled around his back, snoring lightly against the back of his neck. Since that didn't seem to be in the cards, especially given that he'd been pinching the inside of his arm every time he thought to do it, he had resolved to wanting to be away from the prying eyes of the Losers.

Unfortunately for Richie, that wasn't in the cards. "Goddammit, Richie. Stop!" Bev took off at a jog and stood in front of him, grabbing Richie's arms and trying to hold him still.

Richie stepped back. His entire body tensed as he looked at the woman before him. "Bev, I'm serious," he said. His fight or flight reflex was still on high alert. This time, his whole body was screaming run. His slumped shoulders and slightly bowed head didn't match the gritted teeth through which he growled. "Just leave me alone."

The woman had never been one to back down, especially when it was her family involved and, whether they liked it or not, the Losers were the closest thing she could honestly say she'd ever had to family. "Like hell, I will." She grabbed Richie by the sleeve and tugged him into a hallway. "Partner?" She asked, a little more gently, now that

they were on their own.

He sighed. He had promised Eddie that they'd tell them once Pennywise was dead. Granted, he'd imagined Eddie by his side, holding his hand. A kiss to seal the deal. Instead, this would have to do. At least doing it this way, all he needed was a simple "Yeah," and it was out there.

A bittersweet smile crossed Bev's face, replacing the exhausted scowl she'd worn just moments prior. "You guys didn't-"

"Because good ol' Punyweasel had a habit of using Eddie against me and-" he glanced down the hall and gestured toward the trauma room where the doctors had disappeared with Eddie, "ha, would you look at that? Eddie's been impaled because of me." He thrust an accusatory finger into his own chest, voice breaking. "And I fucking said it. Twice!" Earning a rightfully confused stare from Bev, he continued. "Before we even got on the plane, I said to him, 'Don't blame me if you get stabbed and thrown into a gutter.'" He let out a burst of air that someone outside of the conversation might have thought was a laugh. It wasn't. It was far from it. "Stabbed and thrown into a gutter," he repeated to himself. It was amazing, really. A *gutter*. "I didn't remember anything about what happened to us the first time. And that's what the fuck I said." Bev opened her mouth to speak, but Richie cut her off. "And then... *And then* ! I go and make that stupid fucking joke about nominating him as a sacrifice? A sacrifice, Bev. I'm a monster and I don't want to fucking hear any different!"

As the realization of everything that had happened sank down upon him, so too came the tears. He'd managed to pull himself together as they were getting Eddie out of the house and to relative safety. Now, there were no distractions. Now, there was nothing to do but wait and wonder and worry.

She placed her hands on his shoulders then pulled him into a hug. "You're not a monster, Rich. You were kidding. Eddie knows that."

Richie pulled back. His eyes darkened. "Knew, you mean, right?" His words caught her off-guard. She looked up at him. "Because he's *dead*. He's got a *pulse*, but he's *dead*, right?" he challenged.

Bev took a step back. That hurt. She was only doing what she thought was best. "What do you want me to say, Richie? I'm sorry," she whimpered as she took a step back.

"Nothing! That's what I've been trying to get across to you! I don't want you to say anything because A-" He began listing his reasons on his fingers, returning to the anxious kneading at the pads of his fingertips, "I don't trust myself not to say something I'll regret because apparently, I'm great at *that* and B-" he said, as he gave her a look to warn her not to interrupt as she seemed so ready to do, "I really don't want to fucking hear it right now." Bev jumped back despite herself when he started to yell. She knew on some level that Richie wouldn't hurt her, but... "Especially from you." Throwing his hands up in frustration, he then pawed away the tears he'd been trying to ignore and walked away.

Helplessly, she moved to comfort her friend. "Richie-"

He paused but didn't so much as turn back. "Look, just..." he sighed, burying his face in his hands, "leave me alone, Bev, okay?"

That was the end of it. She hated seeing Richie like this; this wasn't *him*. At least not the him she knew. Still, if he wanted space, she guessed he deserved it. "Okay," she acquiesced, returning to the waiting room.

Richie lingered in the halls, pacing nervously. "Hey! How're things?" came a female voice from behind the desk, obscured from his vision

"Alright. Same old. How'd those guidebooks treat you?" asked the second voice.

He could practically hear the smile in her voice. "Well! The Keys were beautiful. I saw-"

Richie moved further out of earshot. He wasn't ready to hear about life going on. Pleasant small talk was never his favorite thing, but hearing people so idly happy... fuck. He was not ready for that right now. Not without Eddie.

When he finally made his way back to the waiting room, he plopped

into the chair across from Bill's. He was standing before the coffee vending machine, punching in his order as he stared across the hall at Mike, chatting with a dark-haired woman. She touched his arm gently and Bill felt himself prickle. "Fuck," he hissed, realizing somewhere along the way, he'd hit a wrong button as his plain coffee with a little sugar came out pale with a strong vanilla scent.

"You alright?" Richie asked, earning a startled jump from the man who hadn't realized he was there.

He shook his head slowly, answering a quiet, "No. Are you?" He offered the coffee to Richie, who just shook his head as well. Shrugging, he placed the cup on a side table and sat back down.

He was going to have to get used to answering this question, he supposed. "No," he said flatly. For now, that was okay.

The pair sat in relative silence for a moment, each buried in their thoughts. Usually, it would have made them both uncomfortable, but all things considered, it felt right. For once, Richie didn't feel the need to fill the air. There was enough noise inside his head this time.

Of course, that meant that Bill reached the point of breaking before Richie. He stared at his hands, worrying that it was inappropriate. Still, he began to ask, "Richie, are you and Eddie-"

"God, what difference does it make?" he interjected. "If one more of you Losers asks me that, I'm gonna lose it." Bill's mouth hung open for a moment, then clipped shut as a heavy set of footsteps and a pair of sneaker treads made their way toward them, then stopped. Watching his friend hang his head dejected, he quickly asked, "What?" as he glanced over his shoulder. Mike and the woman were looking their way, talking quietly.

Bill dug his elbows into his thighs and rubbed at his furrowed brow. "N-nothing."

Leaning back in his chair, Richie sighed. "I'm gonna say to *you* basically the same thing Stan said to *him* on the way over here." He shook his head and looked at him sadly. For a moment, likely the first one in his life, he pitied Bill. He knew there was more at play.

He knew 27 years of lost time was unfair. But there was nothing wrong with owning your feelings once you had them back. "Take care of your own business before you come sticking your fucking nose in mine."

The author blinked at him for a moment as it sunk in that he'd been caught. Unsure of what to do now, he got up, flustered, and excused himself to the bathroom, leaving Richie to ignore the near drunken ramblings of Hoda and Kathy Lee... no, Jenna Bush? When the *fuck* did *that* happen?

Spying the awkward exchange from across the room and deciding to take his chances, Ben sat down beside Richie next. "Not making many friends tonight, are you?"

"Don't wanna make friends," Richie answered, rising from his seat once more.

Ben sighed, following him. "I know. He's gonna pull through this."

Startled by the assurance, Richie's eyes darted to Ben's. It was, of course, so like him to be the first person to give that assertion. No one else had said anything of the like. Richie realized that, maybe, those were the words he needed; someone, anyone else believing as hard as he did that Eddie was going to make it so he could say the words he'd been struggling so hard to choke back: "I don't know what to do if he doesn't." His resolve gave way to heart-wrenching sobs.

Reaching a strong hand out to Richie, he held tightly to his upper arms. "We'll worry about that if it happens. But for right now, Eddie needs you to keep positive. Okay?" He moved slightly, giving Richie no choice but to look at him. "And he needs you not to break down. Who knows how long this is going to take." Ben watched Richie for a moment, then tugged him around the corner, out of sight with a quiet, "Come here."

"What?" he asked, more of a grunt than a word.

"Come here," Ben repeated. When they were safely away from the rest of the Losers, he started over. "I'm going to hug you and you're

going to cry over your husband-" Richie opened his mouth to correct him but didn't get the chance, as Ben paid him no mind, "I don't care if that's not the right word, Richie, I don't know the details and they don't matter right now, at this point, you two have earned husband status-" Richie gave a sad sort of smile through the mask of tears, leave it to good ol' Haystack to get right to the heart of the matter, "and then, when you've gotten yourself together enough, you and me are going back to the townhouse. We're gonna clean up the blood in your bathroom, then we're gonna shower-" Ben paused for a dirty joke that never came, and shook him a little, trying to put the Trashmouth back into place. "Independently, dude, come on-" It was strange, not getting much of an answer out of Richie, but Ben was well aware that it was to be expected. He continued, closing out his plan with "and then we'll grab food and hunker down here for the long haul. Okay?"

Richie nodded. "Can everyone see right through me?" he asked, voice small and insecure.

"Probably," Ben admitted, half-jokingly, but added, "You're not exactly a mystery to any of us, Richie Tozier. Now get in here."

Folding himself into Ben's outstretched arms, Richie closed his eyes, trying to block any further tears from falling, not that tears would stain Ben's shirt any worse than anything else he'd encountered. "I can't lose him, Ben. I can't. I've never lived without him," Richie looked down at the pooled, dried blood on Ben's shirt and tried, uselessly, to imagine that it was anything but what it was. That Ben had broken open a jar of jelly and dumped it on himself instead of carried his near-lifeless soulmate out of a sewer. Willing himself hot to break, he buried his face in Ben's shoulder. "I thought we had time. I thought we had so much more time."

Ben cradled him tightly, resting his cheek on the top of his friend's head. "You do. You have time, Rich," he said. Eddie was in a hospital and he was going to be fine. He had to be. They were seven. They were always seven. The Lucky Seven.

After a long period of time that probably should have been awkward, Richie said quietly, "I love him." It was getting easier to admit every time he said it. It wasn't like he hadn't been out for the majority of

his life. It wasn't like everyone he'd ever met hadn't heard stories about how much he loved his man. It wasn't like he didn't say it ad nauseam to Eddie himself. This wasn't new. Not a word of it. But these were people who had a certain image of Richie; a Richie from a different life. He had just gotten them back. What if, knowing this, they wouldn't want him to stay in their lives?

Granted, if any one of them was going to be open to the idea of love in any form, it would be Ben.

Nodding sagely, Ben replied. "I know. He loves you, too. He told me." He paused, arguing the semantics with himself. "Or, well, he told you but it was me and..."

Richie pulled back and gawked at him. "What?" When had that happened? He and Eddie hadn't really left each other's sides. Had it been when...

No .

No, he wasn't ready to go over *that* yet. He didn't know what that was but if it was what he thought it was, he'd have to talk to Bev and, right now? No, *thank you*.

Ben's expression was soft. So soft, in fact, that Richie half expected him to give some cheesy, too-heartfelt answer like *in the way he looked at you at dinner or the way he tried to save you* and he would have to hit him. Moment over. What he hadn't expected was the truth. "When I was carrying him up earlier. I told you he asked for you, and he did, but he said some other stuff, too." Watching Richie stare at him expectantly, Ben felt a familiar ache. He wanted someone to need him the way Richie so clearly needed Eddie. He rubbed at his friend's upper arm and disclosed, "That he was cold and wanted you to come to bed. And that he loves you." Richie's shoulders slumped forward and he broke back into shattered sobs. Even hearing it from Ben was enough to set him over the edge. He leaned back into his friend and let himself be comforted. "And that's why we have to get you squared away. Who knows how long this is gonna take, but Eddie needs you to be okay so he can get better," Ben said gently, rubbing small circles into Richie's back with his hands.

“What the fuck, Haystack?” Richie sniffled when he finally pulled back from Ben’s arms.

He shrugged. “I’m good at this, I guess,” Ben said.

Richie eyed him skeptically. “Are you?” he asked, jutting his chin out in the direction of the waiting room, meaning to imply Bev, of course.

With a small nod, Ben smiled, “Getting there.” At least, if nothing else, progress was being made. He couldn’t undo the 27 years of hurt, couldn’t make up her mind for her, wouldn’t assume to know how she felt without asking, would never, ever push, so, for now, it was enough for Ben to know that she knew.

“Good. I’m glad,” Richie replied genuinely. When they were young, he’d always hoped they’d figure it out eventually. Maybe, they’d end up at the same college or in the same apartment building. It, obviously, didn’t happen that way, but maybe... In another life.

Throwing his arm over his shoulder and ushering him back through the waiting room, to their friends. “Come on, Trashmouth. Let’s get you cleaned up before we give you back to your man.” When Stan looked up at their footsteps, Ben gave a nod. If Richie had been paying more attention, he would have thought that they had decided amongst themselves that they were going to do this. “I’m taking Richie back to the Townhouse. We’ll be back soon. Keep us posted,” he said.

Stan gave a half-hearted salute. “You got it.”

The pair made it to Ben’s car and out onto the eerily desolate Derry streets. It was a switch, really, from everything they were used to. 3:11 am was usually still a reasonably populated time in Chicago and LA. Derry, on the other hand, was a ghost town. Too quiet. Too serene.

But neither of the men could be bothered to turn the radio on. Richie didn’t have any jokes. Ben didn’t have any tender words of wisdom. They just drove. In the almost half hour it took to get to the townhouse, they hardly realized they were moving. The drive went

by on autopilot. When he put the car in park, he patted Richie on the shoulder, meaning to be supportive, but instead startled him so badly, he nearly hit his head on the visor.

The pair entered the building, finding it empty. They went into Richie and Eddie's room and quickly set about cleaning up the blood around the tile floor, then the tub. They did their best, given the lack of cleaning supplies, which they joked that they would not be telling Eddie about, and both silently hoped meant there was a cleaning service that came in, or else- *yuck* .

Richie's phone vibrated, just as they were finishing up throwing away the evidence. He looked down at the device, startled.

They're taking him into surgery. Will let you know of any updates.

Richie nodded. *That's good. It's progress.* Richie looked at the bathtub, momentarily seeing Bowers' lifeless form there, gone just as soon as it had appeared, then went next door to shower in Bill's room.

When he comes back in a couple of minutes later, there are two new texts from Stan.

Bill and Mike went for a walk. Bev's asleep on the couch. No word from the docs.

There's a soft huff of acknowledgment of the first part of the text. He hopes it means they'll at least talk about their unresolved sexual tension. When they'd brought their foreheads together in the cavern, it had seemed like Bill might jump Mike's bones right then. If so, good for them. If not, for God's sake, talk about it and let each other go. As for the end, he hadn't figured there would be an update on the surgery that fast, but, he appreciated the effort.

Remember when Eddie's mom took away his bike so Mike used to cart him around in the front basket of his? I don't remember him being that small but that happened didn't it?

It did. He remembered the whole thing now. His whole life had been unlocked, and everything he hadn't thought he'd ever

remember, he did. Still, it was the more recent memories that were haunting Richie. *You're little. You'll fit on a barbecue better.* He'd actually said that. He'd actually said that. Fuck. Sure, he hadn't meant it, but he had actually said that he nominated Eddie as a sacrifice and now he had to live with the fact that that might actually happen.

Sinking back onto the bed, Richie buried his face in his hands.

It was still dark outside and he was grateful for that. He didn't want to look at himself in the harsh light of day yet. Sure, he'd showered. His cheek hurt like a motherfucker by then. He knew he probably looked like hell and, honestly, what fucking difference did it make?

As though he could hear Richie's thoughts, Stan shot off another text.

Surgery's going well but it's early. Gonna be a while. Nurse came out asking questions. I told them he fell through the floor and a beam fell on him. We were in Neibolt researching for Bill's book.

He nodded, tossing his phone aside and moved to the dresser, pulling out a pair of jeans and an old t-shirt and shrugged them on. He looked for some sort of jacket, for a moment, wondering where Eddie would have unpacked them.

He turned around, wrapping his arms around his middle and saw it. On the second sweep of the room, he finally spotted the coat rack in the corner. He leafed through the litany of articles Eddie had packed for them, insisting that *Maine gets really fucking cold, Richie, I don't want either of us coming back with pneumonia. Do you know how much more serious it is when you get pneumonia in your forties, Richie?*

He plucked a grey sweatshirt off of the hanger and smiled at it. He buried his face in it. It smelled familiar, comforting, like their laundry soap, and coffee, and hairspray, and Eddie's cologne, warm, and inviting like Eddie's laugh when he'd read the label on the box, describing the scent as *addictive, fiery, and fresh and a powerful fragrance that provides an addictive sensation for the man who pushes limits to the edge and flirts with extreme sensations and encapsulated in a new extreme black bottle, capturing the essence of rugged masculinity*.

He'd read it off in a drippingly femme voice, flitting in and out of ridiculous emphasis on the more outlandish descriptors, deciding that it sounded more like a backroom sex club than a cologne. It didn't help when Eddie had admitted that the category it had been under on the website was *warm and spicy*. In that moment, he'd have given just about anything to hear Eddie laugh at him, even for being stupid about this. He pulled the hoodie on and tried in vain to pretend that it was Eddie's arms around him. He laid down across the bed, wondering if he might be able to talk himself into a quick nap, but...

Even if Richie had managed to delude himself into the moment, his phone buzzing off the edge of the bed would have snapped him out of it.

They're back. I wonder how long it'll take them to realize Bill's flannel is on inside out...

He nodded. Good. As pissed as he was, they deserved happiness and if this was their first step, good for them. If they got to move on and be happy in light of all that had happened, good.

Bring my charger back with you.

Bev's awake...ish. And hungry. So am I. Bring sustenance.

Cafe. Cafe cafe cafe. Caaafe. Caaaafe. To be sung to the tune of the ole soccer chant.

Crossing the hall to Ben's room, his phone vibrated three more times in rapid succession. "Ben, I have a list of demands forming on my phone. We better get moving," he called, moving down the hall to Stan's room, grabbing the cord from the nightstand.

Bill actually broke the coffee vending machine, Richie. Hurry.

Richie shook his head, placing his phone on the dresser as he opened the drawer Ben came out of his room, freshly showered as well and moving toward Bev's room, seemingly on the same mission.

"The natives are restless and experiencing DTs," he called from Stan's room, pulling out a set of clothes for him as well and putting all of the items into the room's clear plastic laundry bag. He moved into

Bill's room and did the same. Charger, clothes, bag. "Do you have clothes you could grab for Mike?" he called out to Ben, figuring them for closer to the same size than he was to Mike.

Ben came out of Bev's room with a small bag of clothes and answered: "Yeah, I got him."

It would have been a little more comedic, he supposed, if he'd brought something of Bill's for him to wear, but that probably would have looked even more ridiculous than the cropped effect Eddie's sweatshirt had on him. However, the point was to get everyone in clothes that weren't covered in grey water and blood and who the fuck knows what else.

Distracting himself into a sense of acceptance, he felt a little better having something to do. He couldn't be helpful at the hospital, but he could be here. He ducked into the bathroom and grabbed a couple of bars of soap and some washcloths. Then he went back to his room and grabbed clean pajamas for Eddie. Truthfully, a pair of his own sweats and one of his old merch T's. That way, he figured, if he had to leave again, there would be something with his face on it as a reminder, plus, they'd be roomy enough not to... He didn't know. Honestly, he figured they wouldn't let Eddie wear real clothes right out of surgery, but he'd rather have them, just in case.

A buzz jolted him out of his thoughts and he realized he'd put his phone down somewhere. Turning back to retrace his steps, it happened again. Fuck. Where did it go? Not in his room, not in Bill's... Stan's. He reached it just in time to realize that the phrase "blowing up your phone" was probably lost on Stanley. He'd only been distracted and away from his phone for maybe 10 minutes. But, as he scrolled up, he realized he'd only answered him in his head. Okay... Maybe the blow-up was deserved.

Okay, I'm starting to get a little worried.

1 Missed Call - Stan The Man

Rich, answer me.

3 Missed Calls - Stan The Man

Do I have to come find you two?

2 Missed Calls - Stan The Man

Bev's starting to get worried she's going to have to marry Eddie if the two of you don't come back soon. I'm starting to get worried we didn't kill It and It found you, so, if you wouldn't mind, could you please-

Richie flicked through his phone's operations, landing on phone and was ready to press dial when a series of texts came through one after the other. Stan, apparently, meant business.

Answer.

Your.

Fucking.

Phone.

Richard.

Justin.

Trashmouth.

Tozier.

So.

Help.

Me.

God.

Finally, he got the chance to press send on the call. Before it even rang one full time, Stan's voice was pouring out of the earpiece loud enough that Ben could hear it from the doorway. "Jesus Christ, Richie, are you trying to give me a heart attack? What the fuck?"

Holding the phone a couple of inches away from his ear, he gave back a droll, "You are in a hospital, so I guess if you have to have one

anywhere...”

“Ha fucking ha,” Stan groaned. Luckily, he couldn’t hear Ben’s amused smile, because that would have earned him a jab, too. “Are you two coming back or did you run away together?”

“I was just,” he looked up at Ben who shrugged at him, waving his hand in a gesture that seemed to mean *this one’s on you* . He sighed, rubbing his temple, and landed on “having a moment. We haven’t been gone that long.”

“After the shit we just went through?” Stan nearly screeched. Apparently, upon remembering that he was in a hospital, he lowered his voice again, and Richie was finally able to put his phone to his ear. “Having you assholes out of my sight for fifteen minutes is too long until otherwise specified, you hear me?”

Richie shook his head, gathering up the bags and gesturing for Ben to follow along, he replied, “The ride back to the townhouse was a half-hour.”

It was true. Stan knew that. Thing is, he didn’t have to like it or even pretend that he did. “Fine,” he said sharply, after a contemptuous silence. “But get your asses back here post haste.” There was the telltale sound of something metal being kicked from Stan’s end, accompanied by a hushed curse and a sigh from the speaker. Richie could swear he could actually hear Stan rolling his eyes. “And for the love of God bring coffee. Bill’s having withdrawals.”

“Will do,” Richie answered, thankful that he wasn’t doing this alone. Thankful moreso that Stan was there with them and not in a casket somewhere. Now that he had him back, he had no idea how he would have been right then if Stan wasn’t there. “Text me with a list of what everyone needs.”

There was another strange noise from the Derry Gen end of the conversation and Richie decided that he really didn’t want to know what kind of trouble they were getting into. Stan was no match for Bev and Bill if he remembered correctly. Mike could go either way, but after the last three days, it was likely that Stan was wildly

outnumbered. When the crash seemed to settle and the *Are you alright, Bev* 's died down, making it clear that she'd rolled off of the couch in her sleep, Stan gave a quiet "Okay." Just as he was going to hang up, he added a hurried "Rich?"

Richie hummed a little, signaling that he was still there.

"I love you, man," Stan said.

For the first time in what felt like days, Richie genuinely smiled. "Love you too, Stan."

"I love you both!" Ben yelled, playfully trying to one-up them.

"Put the phone up to his ear and hug him," Stan said, with the same level of enthusiasm one would expect from someone saying *let's get this over with* to a dentist. Even feeling as he did, Richie was always willing to stick to the schtick.

Loudly and boisterously, four voices carried out of the phone, " *We love you too , Ben ,*" they said, too earnestly to just be placating him. "Now, hurry up and get back here before Bill tips the coffee machine over."

The last thing Richie heard before the call disconnected was a sharp "I didn't mean-" Richie and Ben spent a minute lingering in the hall waiting for Stan's text. It was all coffee orders and food orders and things that Richie wished he knew by heart because they're his best fucking friends and *fuck this town* for making him forget them.

Near to the hospital, the men managed to find a coffee shop where they could get some semblance of what they were looking for. 5 am isn't exactly a time that allows for much of a choice in the matter, so he was just glad it was all fairly simple. The poor woman at the counter, however, looked like she was going to cry when Richie started rattling off eight individual items, a box of black coffee, and a variety of food items that she wasn't sure how she was going to do on her own. Eventually, though, they managed to get the nearly 100 dollar order complete, and Richie dropped the girl a 20 for her trouble. Maybe it was the latent Judaism still lurking within him, but the only thing Richie could really allow himself to dwell on was

making sure that his friends were taken care of. Truthfully, it was probably something in the back of his mind telling him to stockpile because he wasn't going to be leaving that hospital without Eddie by his side, so whatever he could scrounge up would have to do.

He and Ben put the boxes of food in the backseat and made their way to the hospital to find the Losers sequestered to a corner of the waiting room, having rearranged it some so that they're all together and have a table nearby. Save Bill, Richie handed them each their bags of clothes and banished them to the restrooms to go clean up before allowing them to so much as smell their wares. Ben granted Bill a small cup with two shots of espresso, then Richie sent him on his way as well.

Another couple of hours passed with minimal updates and the Losers had begun to disperse, leaving Richie alone with Bill and the promise Mike would be back as soon as he'd showered and gotten into his own clothes.

When the nurse who'd been keeping them posted, a woman about their age, came out, scrub cap on her head and still drying her hands, she was immediately the center of attention. "Mr. Tozier, welcome back," she said, spying Richie immediately. "Your husband is out of surgery. He's still sedated, but he's..." she looked at the beaming hope in his eyes and didn't want to set him up for an outcome that might not happen, so she sat down beside him and placed a hand on his knee, "he's improving. I don't want to get your hopes up, but for tonight, he's looking better. It's lucky you all got him here when you did. If you'd been a couple of minutes longer..." Richie hung his head. He knew that they had almost been too late. But he had to try. She watched him carefully. "Well, there's no way to tell yet. He's going to have to have a couple more surgeries like this one to fix the damages done by the post, but once those are over, it'll be down to how he reacts. In traumas like this..." she started explaining, but Richie found himself lost to the world for a while. He saw that Bill was listening with complete attention, but Richie couldn't... he couldn't listen to possible outcomes. There was only one possible outcome that he could see. Eddie was going to be fine. He was going to wake up and be able to go home and they would have their normal life back and everything would be fine. Anything else was not

happening. When he tuned back in, she was closing up her explanation with, "We're getting him situated, but we can let you sit with him soon." She patted him on the knee gently and then stood up, returning to the area behind the nurse's station.

"What was that about?" Richie asked, stunned by her kindness.

Bill didn't follow. "What was what about?" he asked.

He gestured to the door where the nurse had disappeared. "Husband," he said quietly, as though half-expecting someone to beat the shit out of him for merely saying the word. "And she was..." he fought with himself to come up with the right description, before settling weakly on "accommodating."

Seeing the shock and remembering quickly that Richie hadn't been there for the outcome of Mike's sudden *I want to speak to a manager* side, he began to explain. "I spoiled some of my next book for her and signed the copy of an old one she had in her bag." Richie started to ask about the little twit from before, but before he could even ask, he interrupted. "She shouldn't be bothering you. Mike knows the head nurse and got your relationship status fudged." Richie nodded, taken aback by the lengths that they would go to for each other. "You should talk to him," Bill added quietly, gesturing to where Mike was still standing talking to Janine about Florida. "He understands. He just doesn't know why you guys hid it from us."

Closing his eyes, Richie rested his head against the wall. "We were hiding it back then, too. It just felt like we had to." He shook his head, realizing how stupid it sounded. "In order to survive whatever we had to do here, we decided that, from what little we'd started to remember, we couldn't be open about that part of our lives. You have to remember how people were to me, and I wasn't even out yet." He opened one eye, just a little, and turned to Bill, adding a lightly accusatory, "And we weren't the only ones either."

Bill hummed thoughtfully. He was right about that, after all. Even if it wasn't necessarily the same as a relationship spanning decades and some sort of hex that makes you forget everyone and everything you've ever known, Richie certainly wasn't wrong. "Well, either way, talk to him. The three of you had the most time together." Richie

nodded, even though he wasn't sure he would be able to do it yet. "I think he's a little hurt that you didn't tell him. Then or now."

"Bill, honestly, dude," Richie groaned, finally looking at him fully, "I'm not super worried about if Mike's feelings are hurt right now. I'm still a little pissed at him for dragging us back here." He doubled over and massaged his hands together, lingering a little on his left hand. "We were happy. We were good."

That came as a surprise for Bill. From what he had gathered about everyone else's lives, they hadn't exactly been great. They'd been okay, at best. Good seemed like an overstatement. "Were you?" he asked curiously.

"Yes," Richie insisted genuinely.

Bill considered it for a moment. "You didn't feel stuck?"

Stuck . What kind of word choice was that? *Stuck* ? He swallowed down the sting of the unintentional insult and replied, "No. It... it felt like there were things we couldn't do until something happened," he paused, shocked at how easily that assessment came out. It was true, though. Every time they'd talked about marriage or kids or any other big life milestones, it came down to not yet. Not no, but not yet. It felt like there was something missing. Now, it was clear to Richie that they couldn't get married without the Losers by their side. The holes in the picture of their fullest life were filled now. He stared down at his hands. "We were happy. We had each other. That was enough."

The tears started again. Richie was fairly certain that, after that morning, he couldn't possibly have any left, but here they were. He took his glasses off and put them on the table before pulling in on himself, laying his head upon his arms folded atop his bent knees, curled into the chair like a ball.

Bill reached out and rubbed his hand over Richie's back, unsure of how to help. "I'm sorry, man," he said, feeling incredibly useless.

Richie waved his hand, otherwise unmoving from his position. "I'm fine," he lied.

“Obviously,” Bill said, trying to keep the sarcasm gentle. Mike started to make his way back to them from the desk and felt his heart break a little more for Richie. He had never expected anything like this to happen. He would have... he didn’t know if there was anything he really could have done, but he would have tried. He could have warned them better. He could have...

But he couldn’t. Just like, as they sat there in the sterile, unfamiliar waiting room, he couldn’t do anything truly helpful. All he could do was be there and hope that, maybe, it could be enough.

After a few moments of dense silence, Bill remembered the other half of his duties. “Don’t be mad at Bev, either,” he said, hoping to be as understanding as possible and not sound like he was barking orders.

“Jesus! Who stuck you with the shitty messenger job?” Richie hissed, wiping the tears from his eyes and replacing his glasses.

“Apparently, I have a way with words? Just...” he trailed off, thinking about how much she missed, and he wasn’t too far behind her. “She didn’t know. She was the first one to leave, remember?” he said sadly, then repeated “She didn’t know,” with heavy implications of *I didn’t know* floating in the air with it.

He looked between the two men seated with him for a moment. “Even if we weren’t together, I wouldn’t have left him.” He looked down at his hands again, wondering what this conversation would be like if no one had left. Would they all have felt like he did? Maybe it was just Richie. He remembered the way he’d seen each of their deaths- and fuck did he have to get around to feeling less hurt because he really needed to talk to Bev- and knew that it may have been that. It wasn’t just that it was Eddie. Sure, that made it worse, more desperate for Richie, but he’d have moved Heaven and Earth to get them all out. He said the one thing he knew to be true. “I wouldn’t have left any of you guys.”

Feeling a little guilty, Bill admitted a soft, “I know.” If there was one thing that Bill had carried with him about Richie through the years, that his mind had been unable to quash, it was his ineffable loyalty. Every time he wrote a character with too thick glasses, messy hair, and an intrinsic inability to shut their mouths, they were also the

most fiercely devoted friend to his, admittedly, self-insert characters. They were Richie. They were always Richie. He, of course, could never tell him that.

Luckily, Mike chimed in, “Losers gotta stick together, right?” echoing Bill’s recollection at the restaurant what felt like a lifetime before. Richie didn’t bother to look up, still too lost in thought the pry his gaze away from his hands. If he had, he’d have noticed the soft smile between his two friends and the way Bill’s cheeks tinged pink.

“Right,” he sighed, giving in to the sentiment. As if he could ever feel anything different. “I love her dearly but I’m still mad. I think I’m allowed,” he said. *We can’t save him. We have to get out of here.* He tried to banish the image from his head, but it was still too sore of a subject.

Bill nodded, rubbing at Richie’s shoulder gently. “Just don’t stay mad, okay?”

Even though Richie had every right to be mad and he, Bev and Mike deserved the varying levels of vitriol they'd received, it still didn't feel right. However, Bill knew as well as anyone that, even when Richie was good and ready to forgive, he wouldn't be the one to make the first move. That was why he'd sought him out when they had to fight. It before.

His advice was eerily paternal and it shook Richie to his core. “We lost so much time, man. We just got each other back. I don’t want to lose anyone again.”

Taking a deep breath, he gave in. “Okay, okay,” he repeated, as Bill pulled him into a tight hug.

After another brief moment, the nurse returned with a clipboard full of forms for Richie to fill out. “Mr. Tozier? We can take you back now,” she said. Richie darted to her side and followed to the, thankfully, private room Eddie’d been taken to. She got him set up with all of the buttons and protocols and left him alone with Eddie.

A lifetime of short jokes caught up with him immediately because the only thing he could think of was how small Eddie looked. He

reached out to him gently, careful not to disturb any of the tubes and wires snaking off of him, and rolled his hand in his, lacing their fingers together. He pulled the chair close to his bedside and laid down his head atop their interlocked hands, tears bursting out of him, wracking his body in sobs.

Eddie was alive. Eddie was here. He could touch him, see him, hold him, kiss him.

Eddie was hurt. Eddie had nearly died. He could still feel how faint his pulse had been, how close he'd been to losing everything he loved in one fell blow.

Eddie was his. Eddie loved him. Somehow, though they'd forgotten everything else about that godforsaken town, even down to their own mothers, they remembered each other. They had each other. They loved each other.

Every passing moment felt exponentially longer than it ever needed to. It was easy to lose track of time in a hospital, considering that the window faced, apparently, North or South because there was never any direct sunlight. The windows didn't open. The window didn't open. The clock on the wall seemed to be stuck at some time after 6. The TV channels were limited.

Richie's constant presence meant that he now had a legion of nurses who were utterly charmed by his devotion. It was great, sort of, because he was confident that Eddie was getting the best care. Still, when it came down to it, it sucked. They focused as much on Richie as they did Eddie. Offering him food and drinks and magazines and newspapers. He had never expected to be in a position to be on a first-name basis with hospital staff for any reason.

Phone calls and emails went unanswered. The one person he wanted to talk to was right *there* beside him. He was sure his agent would have dropped him by then if he was anyone else, but he couldn't bring himself to care. The Losers were on a constant rotation. If one of them wanted to speak to him they could call whichever one they'd sent to sit with him. Usually, it was Ben or Stan. He didn't mind that, really, until Ben started trying to heal the world, as he was so apt to do, which made Richie antsy. He understood Ben's point. He

did. But he was feeling pretty immovable by then.

A couple of days later, Mike found himself on Richie duty. Bill had just gone back to the townhouse to give everyone a no change update on Eddie, then to, in his own words, work on feeling like a human again, which Richie wondered if it might have involved a rather unpleasant phone call to a certain woman on the other side of the country.

Mike had grown to be particularly edgy about one-on-one time with Richie. He expected that he was, likely, one of the last people on Earth the poor guy wanted to see, so he would much have preferred anyone else be there with him. He had dragged this poor man back to Derry and almost gotten them all killed- almost gotten his partner killed. In his mind, he deserved whatever tongue lashing Richie decided to dole out.

He had, apparently, missed the part where, if Richie was going to snap at him again, he'd have done it days prior. Now, truthfully, it was a waiting game. As much as Richie didn't want to talk about it, he had resolved to not avoid the discussion when it came up.

He just had to be the one to bring it up.

The men sat in silence while some old movie on AMC played quietly in the background. "You're not mad about the husband thing are you?" Mike asked when his thoughts could no longer stay where he wanted them to.

Richie crumpled. "No. God, thank you for that," he assured, nudging his leg against Mike's gently. He looked at his friend expectantly, waiting for the rest of the questions. Now that he had Eddie by his side, even if he wasn't conscious, he felt a little more up to answering the questions about their relationship he'd known were coming.

"Why did you guys hide it?" Mike asked, after a moment's reflection.

What he hadn't expected was to skip to the hard questions first. He was expecting *when did this start and how has Eddie not suffocated you in your sleep and so you managed to avoid the 27-year curse by just never leaving each other's sides and wait, you're gay ? Not what form of*

existential dread were you avoiding coming back to Derry and what traumatized you so badly that you didn't trust that your best friends, who were the self-proclaimed Losers Club, would accept you? "We didn't. We just..." He sighed, knowing it was futile. They'd hidden it. Of course, they had. "We just didn't mention it. It's not like we're ashamed of each other or anything. It just felt safer."

Mike tilted his head, trying to follow Richie's train of thought. "But you specifically said roommates. You-"

"I was afraid of losing him. Is that so wrong?" *I know your secret, your dirty little secret.* He shook his head, gazing over at his partner, in the one place he spent his whole life trying to avoid being. "Look at what happened. Pennywise used him against me either way," Richie said uselessly.

"But what about before?" Mike asked.

Richie adjusted in his seat to face him a little more directly. "Mike, we've been together for as long as either of us can remember. Now, I can honestly say that I've loved him even longer than that," he said, as plainly as he could manage. "When you did your little Google deep dive or whatever to find our numbers, did you not find all of the red carpet pictures of us together or a single interview where I mention Eddie?"

Mike shook his head, hoping that he didn't have to explain that he hadn't actually Googled them at all. It had been all databases and things that made it seem way more complicated and seedy than it was. Unaware of Mike's thoughts, he continued.

"Even though we couldn't actually be for over half the time we were together, we'd adjusted to being an old married couple by..." He sorted through a cavalcade of new old memories for one that would stand out as when it had become glaringly obvious. He couldn't find one. Even when they were six and Eddie was nagging him about proper handwashing techniques or they were 9 and Richie was goading Eddie into holding his hand by trying to steal the pencil out of it. It was like every one of these memories he'd forgotten deserved a big red rubber stamp that said 100% Gay over them. Eventually, realizing he'd been silent too long, Richie just muttered a wistful,

“God, forever. It must have been so obvious.” He looked over at Mike, eyes connecting for the first time since their conversation started. “But we were also so scared.” He fidgeted with his glasses absently as he continued. “We thought about telling you hundreds of times back then, but we were afraid. Hell, I almost told you a bunch of times and I was the one who was adamant about it not getting out.”

Mike seemed largely unmoved, especially since Richie and Stan had made it clear that they’d both had their suspicions about him and Bill. What he couldn’t understand was why, then, he’d felt that he couldn’t tell him.

“But, you know what Derry’s like man. Better than any of us. And when I googled Derry before we came back and there were news articles about a hate crime on a gay couple from less than 24 hours before?” He shook his head and allowed the impact to land on Mike for a minute. He hadn’t even thought about Adrian Mellon’s death and the newspaper coverage in relation to them coming back. “Nothing’s changed here. Maybe now it has, but...”

Mike clenched his eyes. It had all turned his stomach, and he had no real stakes in it. He had never come out. He had never anything. In the 27 years since defeating It the first time, he’d never done anything more than the expected kissing and handholding one would expect of your big first love. They were children. He figured that, now, if he wasn’t acting on it, it didn’t matter. He was exempt. Now, thinking about the fire that had ignited in his belly when he saw Bill again for the first time... Yeah. No, he got it.

Richie watched as it sunk in for Mike and gave him the time to process before continuing, “Yeah. So, no. No, we’re not idiots,” he laughed, but none of the humor carried on to his face. He dove into the timeline, catching Mike up on what he’d missed. “I was in love with him from the Christmas before Georgie disappeared. We started dating before sophomore year, right after Stan left. Senior year, when I was sneaking into his room every night because I got kicked out, that was nothing new. I’d been doing that all the time since we were, like, 10.” His lips were drawn into a straight pursed line by then in an effort to keep himself from crying again. “I don’t know a life without him, Mike. I don’t even know if I could try.”

“The goal of the coma is to-”

“To let his brain and body heal uninterrupted. I know, I know,” he groaned. He’d heard the doctors. He knew why they were keeping him under. But, truthfully, all it was doing was making him feel more and more like he had to deal with outcomes that weren’t *Eddie is alive and we are going home*. And he wasn’t ready for that. “I just...” he fumbled for the words before settling on the obvious. “I have never gone this long without talking to him. Not ever.”

Mike watched him stare at Eddie for a moment, answering “I get that. Richie, I do. Just try to understand,” he scooted his chair in closer to Richie and clasped his hand over theirs, “it’s not you two against the world anymore. We’re here, too.” He pulled his hand away and ruffled Richie’s hair playfully on the way by. “And if that man wakes up and you look like shit and feel like shit and are generally shit,” he said, adding a rushed, “more so than normal,” before leaning back and folding his arms, “he’s gonna kill the rest of us for not taking good enough care of you.”

Richie rolled his eyes, crossing his legs and slouching into the chair, making himself look even more like a troubled teen than he had when he was a troubled teen. “I can take care of myself, man,” he insisted. He didn’t want to be infantilized. If he needed something for himself, he’d get it or tell them or something. But right now, it was more important that he be by Eddie’s side.

“Can you?” Richie scoffed, but Mike pressed on. “Come on, Richie. I can’t sit here and watch you wither away.”

There it was. He’d been waiting for which one of them was going to start lecturing him about taking better care of himself. He had hoped, in vain apparently, that no one had noticed that he hadn’t left the hospital since Ben had dragged him away that first morning. Two surgeries and now eight sharpie tallies on Eddie’s right wrist were reminders that that had been quite some time. “You don’t have to,” he said, well aware that he was more of a cockroach than anyone truly gave him credit for, considering their insistence that he was a grade-A creep. “But can you do me a huge favor?”

Relief washed over him at the thought that, maybe, he’d gotten

through to him. “Anything,” he said, knowing well that that was a dangerous thing to say.

Richie gauged him carefully. He had half a mind to abuse the *carte blanche* he’d been given, but decided to stick with his initial plan. “Man up with Bill. He still loves you.”

Mike blinked at Richie. He must have been having a stroke, he decided, because he would have sworn that he’d said that Bill loved him. “He... wait. What?” he asked, not allowing himself to believe, even for a moment, that he’d heard him right.

With an exasperated sigh, Richie brought his hand down on Mike’s knee. “Look, dude. I’m exhausted and I have no filter on my best days and I’m pretty far off from a best day in either direction, so just, you know,” he gestured quickly around his mouth in a way that seemed to have something flying out of it uncontrollably. “Nothing new there, but go with me here.” Mike nodded, watching him carefully. “For months after Bill left, you’d change the topic if we mentioned him. Even years down the line, you’d get prickly.”

“Prickly?”

“Yeah,” Richie said, loosing something close to a laugh. “Like a pissed off, defensive porcupine.”

Eyes wide in mock offense, Mike repeated, “Porcupine?”

Slipping into a dead-on Moe Howard, he sneered, “Yeah, porcupine, nyuk nyuk nyuk nyuk,” before poking him just above the eyebrows and making a cartoony *doink* ! Mike laughed at him openly. Richie, however, gave a soft smile that just made him look more tired than he really was.

Refocusing on his point, Richie leveled with him. “Look, just... what I mean to say is maybe we all had it right when we were kids.” He shrugged one shoulder and reached out for Eddie’s hand. “You weren’t ever as happy as you were when Bill was around. Ben wasn’t the same without Bev.” He stared at Eddie, shaking his head. “I don’t like this version of myself and I’m, maybe too seriously, toying with the idea of bubble wrapping Eddie if he wakes up so I never have to

go through this again.” Turning back to Mike, Richie added, “You should have seen you when Bill pressed your heads together after everything was done. You had the same expression you'd have when you guys would ‘go take a leak’ and disappear from the clubhouse for an hour.”

Mike balked at him. He didn't realize it had been that obvious. If Richie, of all people, had noticed, everyone else had to have.

“If he doesn't know already, just tell him. Be happy. Don't waste it.” He raised his eyebrows a little, realizing that Mike was apparently lost in thought. “You guys deserve to be happy,” he concluded.

“Shit,” Mike hissed, rubbing the heels of his hands against his eyes, wondering just when he'd started crying.

Richie just nodded. “Yeah.” Love had a way of doing that to people, he'd noticed.

Trying to regain his composure, Mike joked, “When did you grow a brain?”

“I've always had one. I just choose when to expend the energy to use it,” Richie confessed, earning a quiet laugh from Mike. Plus, the medication that accompanied ADHD diagnosis that came in his 20's might have helped, too. “Honestly, right now, it's just firing on all cylinders and I can't seem to shut it off. Telling you to deal with your shit is less painful than dealing with mine.”

That had set an unexpected tone. It wouldn't have been accurate to say that Mike hadn't expected Richie to have that type of a grasp on his emotions, but he hadn't expected it to be delivered so acutely. Even though Richie and Eddie had been the last of the Losers to leave and they had, by and large, calmed down a bit into their teens, this Richie was such a stark contrast that it was jarring. Mike found himself hoping that it was just because of stress and he hadn't been too changed by being back in Derry.

In hopes of lightening the mood, Mike said quietly, “You know he's gonna be fine, right?” He tried to sound as sure of that as he could, for Richie's sake.

Turning back to Eddie, he considered it for a moment. He wanted to stay honest with Mike, now that it was all on the table. “No. I can honestly tell you that I don’t know that. And neither do you,” he said plainly. It was true. Even the doctors couldn’t be sure. They had hopes. They could guess. Still, no one could look him in the eye and say *Yes, Richie, Eddie will wake up and when he wakes up he will be the same man you fell in love with.* Until someone could say that and make him believe it, he simply said, “I appreciate the positivity, but it’s just empty.”

“Look,” Mike said, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees, “how did everything we’ve gone through not drill the power of belief into your thick skull?”

“I just don’t know-”

“If nothing else,” he said, nudging Richie’s foot with his to try to get his attention, “believe in Eddie.” Richie released a puff of air like he’d been punched. Mike reached out and put his hand on Eddie’s knee, shaking him a little to remind Richie that he wasn’t imagining him. “He’s real, he’s alive, he’s right here, and he’s counting on you.” He looked up at his friend, adding a patient, “Can you do that?”

Richie was silent for a while. He watched Eddie’s chest rise and fall. He toyed with his hand and brushed his hair out of his face. It was all as it should be, he supposed, except for the *why are you watching me sleep, you creep* that would be immediately followed by a kiss and the way he’d squeeze his hand back in acknowledgment and the frustrated huff in which he’d put his hair back the way it belonged. He’d never thought he’d miss someone he was in the same room as.

Still, it was a simple request. Believe in Eddie. That was like saying blink when your eyes get dry. It wasn’t an option. It was a compulsion.

“Yeah,” he said when he’d finally worked through it. “Yeah, that I can do.”

Notes for the Chapter:

- 1.) I’m going to say to you all what Mike said to

Richie- Believe in Eddie.

2.) This is, possibly, my favorite serendipitous Taylor lyric to chapter title, if not tied with the chapter after next.

3.) There are a couple of interesting* moments in here for me for a couple of reasons and I'd love to hear what some of your theories for like... why I chose certain things because there's some things in here that were so deliberate.

*Interesting is code for Amanda sat at her computer screen and went OOOOH THAT'S GOOD for like five minutes and then had to keep going back and rereading it because it was like **chef's kiss**

9. The Dark Days When The Fear Crept Into My Mind

Summary for the Chapter:

Eddie comes to grips with what is happening with him. // Richie and the rest of the Losers talk to Eddie and each other, mending the ties that bind.

When his eyes open, the first thing he sees is white. As he becomes more and more aware, the more he realizes that's all there is. A sprawling blank canvas, warm and bright, and empty. He's alone. Totally and utterly alone

Eddie's brown eyes search the void and he walks, exerting no energy. Is this heaven? It could be, he supposes. But there are no pearly gates, no choirs, no loved ones to greet him. Granted, he realizes, everyone he's ever loved, he guesses, is still alive. He'd always expected his father to be there to greet him, though, so maybe it's not.

Could it be hell? He wouldn't rule it out. Fire and brimstone seem so passe, come to think of it. Solitary confinement for all eternity does sound like the kind of thing that would be his punishment. But apart from loving Richie, if that's honestly a reason, he can't think of a single thing that would earn him eternal damnation, so he rules that out quickly too.

It could be neither. Some sort of purgatory. His soul could be in some sort of weird sense of stasis until something happens. Maybe he's waiting for Richie. He hopes not. He's not ready to see Richie here. Wherever here is, he has a feeling that Richie doesn't belong here. He misses him, but no. This isn't someplace he can be.

He stops walking, or more accurately stops moving, when he realizes something. He still has thoughts. Still has memories. He can't be dead. He's too aware, he thinks, for death. There would have to be a cessation of awareness and function, wouldn't there? That's what the word literally means.

No, Eddie Kaspbrak is not dead.

So, what the fuck is this place?

At Eddie's bedside, Bill sat with his feet propped on the chair that had previously been occupied by Stan. He'd begun to carry his laptop with him on his visits, set on writing everything down before he left Derry. That way, he figured, even if he left and forgot it all again, he'd have names and dates and phone numbers and details to jog his memory. Even if it was gone from his brain, it wouldn't be gone from the world.

He looked over at his friend's resting frame and eyed him, trying to figure out how best to explain that half of them were so willing to leave him to rot away in the underground, while he was still clearly alive and they were so willing to drag Richie.

He was right. He was right more often than not. Especially when it came to Eddie.

Bill folded his arms and looked at him, focusing on the two neat groupings of five tally marks on the inside of his wrist. The doctors had encouraged talking to him, so he decided to give it a shot. "How'd you do it, Eds?" He closed his eyes and shook his head. "How'd you manage to find and bag your soulmate as a kid? And *in Derry*, no less." He glanced out the door, making sure he was alone, then leaned in to rest against the rail.

As he thought back over the time he'd spent with Mike, the time after he'd spent fixating on a void that didn't make sense, he couldn't put it together. He couldn't remember when he'd decided to stuff it all down, but it was never gone. He couldn't remember forgetting. "I couldn't even manage to tell him then. I didn't realize it mattered." Bill looked down at the simple band of gold that still lived on his left hand with something so close to contempt it scared him. "When I married Audra, I th-th-thought it would go away." He took a deep breath, surprised that the stammer had come back, then. "I th-th-thought I w-w-wouldn't want guys anymore. Worse than that, I still wanted Mike..."

He thought about the way he'd describe the characters in his books

that, now, were so clearly Mike. And he retraced the way he'd never be happy with the casting for movie adaptations. They weren't right. Their voices were too sharp. The smile was too even. Their eyes were distant. He didn't... feel it. Often, he'd be so disappointed in their perfectly fine performances that they'd end up, largely, on the cutting room floor. Early on, Michael Ealy had told him, not so politely and in far more direct words, where to stick his ego. Taj Mowry has actively said that he's insane. The last go-round, it had been Will Smith. Will fucking Smith of all people. And he just... wasn't it.

More succinctly, they weren't Mike.

Just like Audra, Bryce Dallas Howard, and the girl from Game of Thrones weren't Bev. His agent and Jesse Eisenberg wasn't Stan. Timothee Chalamet and Rainn Wilson weren't Richie. Freddie Highmore and Matt Dillon weren't Eddie. James Corden wasn't Ben. They all did their jobs and did them well, some of them even getting awards for their portrayals, but no matter what, they fell flat for Bill. They all felt like meager imitations of something so much larger than life.

"I didn't know it was him, obviously, but..." he trailed off for a moment, still kicking himself for never realizing what it was that was missing. "I think he's why I haven't been able to write a happy ending, Eds. We didn't get ours." He drew in on himself, watching Eddie carefully. "None of us did."

He fell silent, lost in thought. He had lived next fucking door to Richie and Eddie for years and they just... existed. They passed each other in the hall. He'd heard... a lot out of them. A lot. He'd been a little sad when they moved to L.A. but he couldn't place why. It seemed obvious now.

"You know, I could never bring myself to watch Richie's arc on Audra's show," he said, after a while. "I said it was because I thought he was v-v-v-vile. Whatever it was, it pained me to watch him. Actually hurt." He had actually had a panic attack when she'd shown him his headshot. But Richie and Eddie weren't the only Losers he'd encountered over the years. "I got an offer from Bev's company to dress me for an award ceremony and I turned them down because something about the name made me not want to say it on a red

carpet. It didn't feel right."

Bev had told him all about Tom, by then, and it took everything he'd had not to employ all of the creepy things in his browser's search history that might make feds suspicious that were all for his books. He was a horror author, after all. If the Losers bond gave them any sort of psychic connection, it made perfect sense that Rogan/Marsh gave him an uneasy feeling.

That uneasy feeling, though, was nothing compared to the one he felt seeing Eddie in a hospital bed. "This doesn't feel right." He sighed, burying his face in his hands and trying to wrap his head around what went wrong. "We were all together. We were supposed to make it out okay. You need to be okay." Bill reached out and rested his hand on Eddie's knee. "You're a part of this happy ending, man," he assured.

This doesn't feel right. After walking for who knows how long, ambling through the snowblindness of the vast nothingness he's trapped in, Eddie hears Bill's voice and, unexpectedly, he agrees with it.

But it's Bill! Bill's *here!*

He takes off like a bolt toward the sound. What was it Bill used to insist about Silver? Fast enough to beat the devil? *Well, heigh-fucking -ho, Big Bill, I'm coming*, he thinks. *You need to be okay.* The second time he hears it, he realizes it's coming from everywhere and nowhere. He can't get to him. He stops running.

"Bill," he shouts, but the sound stops dead. It doesn't travel. It doesn't echo. It doesn't carry. It just mutes. Mulling it over, he tries again. "BILL!"

The light surges when he hears Bill's voice again, but he can't quite make out what he's saying. There's a second voice and Eddie can't hear it at all.

Maybe, he thinks, he got caught in the deadlights with Richie and they're trying to figure out how to free them both. He

thinks it over, but it's not possible. He Sleeping Beauty'd his ass right out of the lights and it was amazing and then he'd... he can't remember. He can't remember but he knows these can't be the deadlights because he got Richie out of them. They weren't there. They were gone.

So, what the fuck do you call this?

And where the fuck is Richie. Why is this place only giving him Bill? Not for nothing, but there are at least three other Losers who he'd expect ahead of Bill. He'd like to get in contact with whoever's responsible for programming and give them a piece of his mind. If he has to hear anything, right now, the only person he wants to hear is Richie, like an overnight, syndicated radio host. Every channel of his psyche should be playing Richie on repeat.

Come on, Richie, he thinks, help me out, sweetheart .

It took a couple of long nights for Mike to let himself be alone with Eddie. Even though he and Richie were on better, though admittedly still shaky, terms, it still felt wrong. Mike's conscience weighed heavy and just the sight of Eddie, even when the room was crowded with their friends, sometimes threatened to tear him in two.

That morning, Mike and Bill had ridden up to the hospital early to surprise Richie with chocolate chip pancakes from Dreamers after a memory had struck Mike in the middle of the night. Bill had ducked from the room to take a call and Richie had been called away by one of Eddie's doctors with a question about his medical history. Mike was left in the room alone with Eddie. He looked up at the clock absently, then back to Eddie. His closed eyes were sunken and bruised. His face seemed too thin. It sucked the air from Mike's lungs and he could do little more than stare.

"I'm sorry," he said, voice quivering and unsure, then tried again. "I'm sorry." Better. "I'm sorry I brought you back here." It wasn't that he was sorry to see him, or that he was sorry that they'd banded together; It would still be alive otherwise. "I'm sorry I fucked this up so bad." Mike clenched his jaw and folded his arms. "I'm sorry I was on board to leave you down there." His brain replayed Richie's

panicked, desperate pleas and his defensive snarl as the Losers tried to drag him away. *I'm not leaving him here. I'm not. I won't.* A startling thought crossed his mind; if Eddie were to die, the last thing he'd likely have heard would be half of his childhood friends trying to convince the love of his life to leave him in a fucking sewer. The weight of that hit him like a ton of bricks. Losers gotta stick together, right? *Clearly...* "I'm sorry I didn't fight for you," he said, grabbing his friend's hand gently and encapsulating it in his own. "I'm sorry you're hurt," the lump in his throat clenched and he found himself in tears. "I'm sorry Richie's mad." He looked at him, the obvious line of the gauze on his torso, his gaunt face, and lost any semblance of composure. "This is my fault, Eddie. I'm sorry," he sobbed, repeating, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

From the doorway where he'd been standing for the majority of Mike's apology, Richie called gently, "Mike?"

"Richie," he sobbed, clinging to his friend once he was within arm's length. He clung to him desperately, fists full of his shirt, leaving wet tearstains into his beat-up, old T-shirt.

Uselessly, Richie rubbed Mike's head, quietly assuring, "It's okay, Mikey."

Mike sniffled, voice thick and strangled with emotion. "It's not."

There was a moment where Richie was completely at a loss. He was right. It didn't need saying. It wasn't okay. Not at all. Richie sighed deeply, more than a little frustrated by it all. "I know it's not," he said plainly, pressing his glasses back up onto the bridge of his nose before pinching it tightly. "And I had it entirely planned to blame you," he admitted.

"Blame me," Mike said, looking up at Richie, seeking absolution. "I deserve it."

"No." It would have been easy- it would have been so fucking easy- for Richie to stand by and prostrate himself in self-flagellatory abuse, but it wasn't right. "It's not okay, but it's not your fault either." Mike moved to argue, but Richie stilled him, looking him in the eye with a steady hand on his shoulder. "Stop," he said, finally wrapping him in

a tight hug. “Just stop.”

Unable to stop the emotion, he continued to cling to Richie, who stood there, eyes closed and hands gently cradling the back of Mike's head as he sobbed, alternating between apologies and his name. It broke Richie's heart, watching his friend dissolve into full-body sobs, but he couldn't really help because he knew that at any given moment, he was likely to do the same. “Enough, Mikey,” he cooed, rocking them back and forth. “It's done.”

A deep, voice trembles through the air and the light around Eddie changes. It's no longer the warm white. It's grey, like storm clouds on a summer day, and he thinks about how Richie would be pulling him out into the street to dance and kiss and laugh like they're in a fucking Nicholas Sparks movie instead of a bonafide Bill Denbrough original.

He tries not to dwell. He tries not to miss Richie. But it's hard. He doesn't know how long he's been here. He doesn't know how long until he'll figure it out.

The booming voice breaks through, *I'm sorry* thundering and striking all around him. The sky cracks open. It begins to pour.

He runs, searching for cover he's aware he'll never find. He can't feel the rain, anyway, despite his clothes being drenched. They're heavy and they cling but he's not wet. It's bizarre. Whatever this is, wherever he is, he needs to figure it out and get the hell out. If this is one of the clown's tricks- If it's not dead... he doesn't know what he'll do.

Enough, Mikey, enough.

Richie.

His boyfriend's voice is enough to bring him to his knees, finally off his feet- which should, he realizes, be throbbing and aching and complaining to no end- for the first time since he came to.

The rain slows, then stops. The skies clear.

Thank you, sweetheart, he thinks as loud as he can.

Mike was crying over him? He's not dead. This isn't a trick or a vision. It's not a dream. He has a thought, a word on the tip of his tongue that he doesn't want to say. If he's right, if it's that, he doesn't know what to think or do.

Through the almost two weeks since Eddie'd been unconscious, Stan and Ben had scarcely left the room without Richie by their side, which meant that the nurses were nearly as familiar with them as they were with Richie. On day thirteen, Ben found himself alone in the room with Eddie, Stan having strong-armed Richie back to the Townhouse.

"Man, I miss you," he said easily, as though Eddie were obviously going to answer him back. He sipped his coffee and smiled to himself, laughing. "Do you remember the fall after It, when we got pissed off at everyone else because we missed Bev and no one else seemed to care?" He rolled his eyes at his hypersensitivity at the time, glad that it had leveled out with age.

Still, he recalled the moment out loud. "We went and hung out on the roof of the movie theatre and stared at the stars. I showed you Vega and Altair," he said, sketching out the constellations on a pad of paper someone had left from a game of tic tac toe the night before. "I thought I was being profound and talking about me and Bev, being a mopey little shit about her leaving and making her out to be a goddess and her aunt took her away because she hated me, a lowly cowherder," he laughed at the image, then continued, "and so she carved a river between us." Ben shook his head and stared at the ceiling.

A nurse, Anna, young and sweet and so heartened by the Losers tight-knit unit, heard Ben talking and rushed in, hoping that Eddie had stirred. Ben looked up at her and smiled sadly, shaking his head. *Not yet. Trust me*, he thought, *I'd be screaming if he had*. "Yeah, I was a melodramatic asshole, wasn't I?" he said, when he finally found it in himself to continue. "But, uh... it was you two, wasn't it?" He laughed, mulling the thought over in his head again. "You and Richie," he said. It was obvious now, he thought. So fucking obvious he couldn't believe that he'd missed it. Pressing the paper, littered with constellations into Eddie's palm, Ben left his hand rested in his friend's. "Well, uh, I'm an architect, now, Eds," he said confidently,

“so I can build fucking bridges and shit.” He smiled, remembering the fit Eddie had thrown about safety codes when he’d shown them the clubhouse. Oh, how things had changed. “Whatever you need to come back to this side of the river, I’ll do it, man,” he said, rubbing at a pressure point on the fleshy piece of his palm, just under his thumb. He’d read somewhere that that might help in elevating brain function and consciousness. It was the least he could do, quietly repeating, “Come back to us, Eddie.”

Eddie walks and walks. He doesn’t know where he’s going and it’s really throwing him. He’s always had a good sense of direction, but there’s nothing to go by here, only his gut and the deepest instinct that it’s just... right. He’s idly wishing he could see the North Star when his surroundings begin to swim again.

The world becomes aglow. A blanket of sapphire studded in brilliant pearls envelops Eddie. The stars are braille letters he could follow blindly. The night sky has always been a cause of wonder to him, but now, it’s as familiar as the way Richie’s body curves to fit between his arms as they fall asleep warm and safe in their bed.

The stars have never danced before. Eddie watches their waltz in awe. It’s breathtaking.

Or it *would* be.

If he needed to breathe.

The realization that, even when he holds his breath, his lungs expand and contract beneath his ribcage to no real sensation is startling at first. But his heart is still thrumming in his chest.

I’m alive, he reminds himself. *I’m alive, but I don’t need to breathe. What else could that mean?*

The kaleidoscopic swirling of the stars sounds vaguely familiar. Mechanical, even. As the constellations mingle and entwine, he finds himself calming back into a rhythm.

I’m alive.

I'm alive.

I'm...

Stan set his phone face up on the table, quickly flicking past the date and activating the candle app he'd downloaded on his phone when one of the nurses confirmed his suspicion that, no, he couldn't have an open flame in a patient room, even for a couple of minutes. He couldn't do this with the reminder that it had been two weeks. Two solid weeks since the Losers won. Two solid weeks of bedside vigils. Two solid weeks of non-stop desperate worrying about people he hadn't thought about in 20-odd years before.

"I know Richie doesn't really practice anymore," Stan starts softly, edging the chair closer to Eddie's bedside and pressing the button to shut off the Television. "Truthfully, neither do I," he admits casually, adding a quick "High holy days only which, apparently, makes me the most Catholic of all the Jews or something," he says, affixing the yarmulke he'd snagged from the multidenominational chapel downstairs to the crown of his head, adding, "but I'm okay with that. Anyway, um," he stretched the mmm sound for much longer than he needed to, wondering how to go about this, as though Eddie would object. "I don't know if this will help you, but it's less for you right now than it is for him." He gave a dry laugh at the sheer nerve of that then explained quickly, "I know that sounds horrible because you're the one in the hospital bed, but Richie went to get coffee and he asked me to do this while he was gone because he knew he wouldn't be able to watch if he was here."

He stood up and crossed to the door, closing it over and shutting off the lights and busying himself on the shades. "I know, The One And Only Trashmouth asked for prayers," he said, to the window, quickly mapping out a compass in his head to figure out which way was East, happily realizing that, since the sun rose in the East and came up to the right of the window, he'd be facing Eddie. That was good, he figured. It would be like he was just talking to him. Like normal. If normal was talking to his unconscious goyishe friend in Hebrew about asking God for his strength in healing him. Yeah. Like normal.

He turned and sat down, taking Eddie's hand in his. "But it's for you, Eds. So, obviously he's really pulling out all the stops. So, um..." he

stalled, glancing around the room to make sure everything was in order before pulling his cyber candle to the bed between Eddie and himself. “I’m just gonna pray with you.” He imagined Eddie groaning and griping about *organized religion* and *brainwashing* and *cults* and smiled, continuing against the silence. “Just for a minute. For Richie, okay?” He softened as the Eddie-voice in his head lost his argument. *For Richie*. “It’s really quick and, what does it hurt, right? I figure if Richie asks for it right now, I’m gonna do the best I can because I can’t give him the one thing he wants more than anything else.” The air grew thick and Stan found it more than a little hard to get his bearings. He took leaned to the side, poking idly at Eddie’s arm. “At tonight’s performance of Waking Up With The Kaspbrak-ziers, the role of The One Thing He Wants More Than Anything Else will be played by Eddie Kaspbrak,” he stage announced. Nothing. Not even a blip on the heart monitor. “Look, if you were gonna be waking up anytime soon, now would be the time to do it because, honestly, I’d love to take all the credit for it,” he said, still staring at the steady pattern of the green line. There had been a couple of times where, for no reason at all, the line would behave erratically and Stan could almost swear he saw something.

Deciding it would be better to cut to the chase, Stanley bowed his head, holding Eddie’s hand to his chest. “Mi Shebeirach avoteinu v’imoteinu, Avraham, Yitzchak v’Yaakov, Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel v’Lei-ah, hu y’vareich et hacholim Eddie,” he cantored to himself. “HaKadosh Baruch Hu yimalei rachamim aleihem, l’hachalimam ul’rapotam ul’hachazikam, v’yishlach lahem m’heirah r’fuah, r’fuah shleimah min hashamayim, r’fuat hanefesh ur’fuat haguf, hashta baagala uviz’man kariv. V’nomar: Amen.” He kissed the back of Eddie’s hand then tapped while blowing out the app candle. As fast as he’d begun, he was finished. “See, easy,” he said, standing up to put the room back in order.

When the lights and TV were back on, Richie was just hardly behind. In truth, he’d been standing there since just after he’d started talking, standing silently and just watching. He held the two cups of coffee he’d been given by the nurse to his chest.

Still, unaware of his friend’s presence, Stan coached, “Now, all you have to do is wake up.”

Yeah, right.

He let himself sit in silence for a moment before looking up at Richie sadly. He'd hoped it would work. He'd hoped it would do *something*. Still, when he finally entered the room and wrapped Stan in a tight hug, thanking him repeatedly for trying. The men were too distracted by comforting each other to notice that Eddie's heart monitor had started doing double time.

The vastness of Eddie's location still astounds him. It's better, he's found, when his friends make cameos. He laughs a little, realizing that maybe watching The Good Place on the plane ride in may not have been the best bet, considering how he'd wound up.

Even when trippy shit, sudden darkness and a circle of six flickering candles spooks the shit out of him, it's better if he's not totally alone. The thing is, he never feels alone. Not in an ominous, something's watching me, way, but more a, someone's got his back type of way.

It doesn't matter, really, because in the dim light, Stan's voice echoes out, calm and level and heartened. "May the one who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, bless and heal Eddie, who is ill."

Ill. Panic rises in his chest. *You're sick, Eddie. It's all that filthy Tozier boy's fault.* Eddie feels like he might claw out of his skin at the thought of it.

Claw. A flash of a memory. It. *This kills monsters if you believe it does*. His whole body jolts. He clamps his eyes shut as he listens to Stan's voice, so clear and sure he can almost imagine he's saying it in his ear.

"May the Blessed Holy One be filled with compassion for their health to be restored and their strength to be revived. May God swiftly send them a complete renewal of body and spirit, and let us say..." There's a pause. Eddie thinks about what could be coming next and warms. "Amen." He's never been a religious man. The whole gay thing knocked that out the first time his

mother threw Leviticus at him as a counterpoint to the nice men down the street with the cool car and the cute little dog. But hearing it come from Stan, earnest and pure and completely devoid of malice, he thinks he can understand. There's something beautiful about the sentiment, even if there's nothing out there to make it happen. Who knows, anymore. Maybe God, if there is one, is some sort of omniscient talking sea turtle or some shit. That would be something, wouldn't it.

Eddie is so buried in his own head that he almost misses the strange clenching sensation like he's wearing a glove that doesn't quite fit. "See, easy, now, all you have to do is wake up," he hears Stan say and does everything he can think of.

He pinches the inside of his arm. The side of his neck. His side. His wrist. Nothing. There's no water, but he thinks about the days where they'd jump into the quarry. The cold water splashing up around him. He thinks about drinking a half-frozen bottle of water after a strenuous run. He squeezes his eyes shut and opens them again, finding himself in the same place he was before.

Fuck. I'm trying, Stan, he tries to scream.

By the time Bev made it back to the hospital, it was nearly past visiting hours. Richie was asleep with his hands folded over Eddie's. His face was slightly twisted, clearly not having as restful of asleep as she'd hoped for him. Every time she opened the door, she was more and more worried that he might not wake up. "Oh, Eds. I'm..." she said quietly, hesitating at the foot of the bed. "I'm sorry." Her voice was low, just above a whisper, not unlike that first night at the Townhouse when they'd all thought Stan was dead.

She banished the word from her mind. Eddie was not dead. He was there in front of her and he was not dead.

Bev wrapped her long, slender fingers around Eddie's ankles, running her thumbs over them. "I want you to know that if you and Richie never forgive me, that's fine." She swallowed her emotions as best she could, voice miraculously not showing the tear strain she'd expected as her cheeks grew slick with wetness. "I deserve it. I

mean,” she stopped, letting the image of Eddie’s unconscious body come forward in her mind and brought with it the sounds of Richie sobbing as he wrapped him tightly in his arms. “I didn’t *want* to leave you. I would never want that, Eddie, you have to know that,” she hiccupped.

“But I thought it was too late. I was afraid,” Bev said slowly, trying to calm herself down as Richie stirred subtly. She looked over at him and forced herself to calm down. “I was so afraid that if we waited to get you out that it would have been the end for us too,” she explained, suddenly feeling like the most selfish disgrace. “I’m sorry. I just thought...” She trailed off. It didn’t matter what she thought. It was wrong. As soon as they realized he was still alive, they should have fought together to get him out. “I guess I wasn’t thinking clearly.

Staring down at the two of them, so intimately positioned, and so unbelievably naturally, as though they couldn’t operate independently. Maybe they couldn’t. “I had this feeling in the pit of my stomach that you wouldn’t have wanted us to all die because you did. I could almost hear you telling Richie to go. I thought it was our only chance. I thought we couldn’t make it if we had to...” *Either way, you’re carrying one of us. I think the one who won’t fight you every step of the way might be the one you want.* “I don’t know,” she said, deflated. “I was wrong. Maybe it was just because it’s how I would have wanted it if it were me.” She reached out and gently caressed Richie’s arm, too. “But you see this man right here? He wouldn’t let that happen. Not ever. And he hasn’t left your side this whole time.” She gently traced her thumb over his skin, hoping to comfort him. He needed to rest. “I know that the doctors are keeping you in this coma, Eddie, but fight,” she leaned over the footboard and placed her hands back on Eddie’s legs a little more fervently. Her words were hardly intelligible as she pleaded, “Please fight. Fight for Richie like he’s fighting for you.” “I’m so sorry, honey.” She wasn’t sure who she meant more, Richie or Eddie. She pressed a gentle kiss to each of their heads and made her way out of the door, turning left out of the door and making a beeline for the elevator.

Richie opened his eyes and straightened up with a sigh. He guessed it was time.

Coma.

That's the word Eddie had been trying to avoid.

Coma. *Sick* . Coma. *Asthma* . Coma. *Doctors* . Coma. *Weak* .
Coma. *Medicine* . Coma. *Delicate* . Coma...

Yes, mommy.

A revolving door of everything he's overcome spins and spins before him. It makes Eddie dizzy and he wants it to stop. It won't. It can't. The one thing Eddie has learned that he *can* control is himself.

He's in a *coma*.

He turns on his heel and runs. Runs and runs and runs until he feels like his heart might burst. Then, he runs some more.

He's *in a coma*.

He stops, doubled over with his hands on his knees. Finally, he feels himself burst into tears.

He's in a coma.

And Richie is right there next to him. Holding his hand. And he can't feel him or see him. The one thing he's wanted so desperately the whole time has been there all along. And he can't know. He can't enjoy it.

He's in a *coma*.

And Richie is standing in front of him.

"Richie," he says, voice barely above a whisper, but it's there. And so is Richie.

He'd entered the room that morning as casually as if he'd come home from a meeting to find Eddie on the couch nursing a stomach virus he'd fought so desperately against. "Hi, babe. You feeling any better?" Richie asked, carrying two matching cups in with him and

putting them on the table. "I brought you coffee that I'm inevitably going to drink because you are still asleep," he added, picking his words deliberately. "I'm saying asleep because anything else is completely unacceptable, Eddie." He sat down on the edge of the bed beside him and lifted his hand into his lap. "God, Eds, I hate seeing you like this. Do you know that? I absolutely *hate* it." He was starting to run out of things to say that didn't sound pathetic. "And, um... I love you so much," he said, like he was rattling off a to-do list. To some extent, he was. But his to-do list these days ultimately consisted of making sure Eddie knew he was loved and safe and that he wasn't alone.

A couple of days prior when the dry spell started, Richie had begun reminiscing. Stan had, at first, teased him, saying that it was such an old man thing to do. But, after a while, it had become a thing. Every time the Losers came in, they'd tell a story about something that happened in the 27 years that had passed. It was surreal, hearing stories about them when they weren't even offered the chance to stay in touch.

"Do you remember when we first moved to LA and I wound up in the hospital with my appendix ruptured because I didn't want you to worry about me but ultimately made everything worse?" He smiled a little, sadly. The last thing he ever wanted to do was make Eddie worry. "When I finally came out from the anesthesia, you were super gentle and loving and careful and," he leaned over, eyes watering threateningly, "all I could think of was how much I wanted you to smack me and call me an idiot and lecture me about how pain is your body telling you something's wrong."

He crossed his arms over his chest protectively. "Well, uh, this is me telling you, something's wrong, Eds." He watched Eddie carefully for any signs of distress. "But I know what it is," he admitted. "It's you. Seeing you like this is actually causing me *physical* pain." He reached out and rested his hand across Eddie's thigh. He stared at it for a moment, searching for the right words. "It's like someone cut off my arm. There's a part of me missing."

Momentarily, Richie retreated into his own head. "I don't know how to be me without you." It was true. He didn't know who this sad, bitchass man was, but he wasn't Richie Trashmouth Tozier. No,

Trashmouth this man may not have been, but he certainly was Richie. Especially the Richie who still didn't know if Eddie would ever wake up. "God, how pathetic and codependent does that sound?"

"But, Eddie, I've never had to be without you. And I'm sitting here looking at your face and I've kissed you so many times that I'm pretty sure the ghosts of the Brothers Grimm have come here to try to shake some sense into me." He shook Eddie's hand and cleared his throat and gave old-school German a shot. "Mein Herr, our books were cautionary tales, not instruction manuals. You needn't take them so literally. Your lips will not wake the princess. That is what the doctors are here for, Liebchen." He kissed Eddie, stomach twisting in knots when he didn't kiss back. He frowned and pulled back. "Okay, not my best, but you can't bitch about it, so I guess it doesn't matter."

An idea formed in his mind that he was, frankly, shocked he hadn't come up with before. "You need to wake up now, because, honestly, it's hard to rub one out when my hand's not there *and* your mother's not there to suck it."

Even though his brain filled in what it knew should have followed.

Eddie remembers it all.

Despite the Derry effect, his memory has always been really top-notch. Once he knows something, he knows it forever. Capital of Bangladesh? Dhaka. How many calories are in the Black Pepper Chicken Richie gets from Panda Express every time they go? 280. Melting Point of Tungsten? 6,192° F. He doesn't get it, but it's just one of his things.

He stares at the Richie his brain has invented for him amazed at how Richie it is. But after 30 years, he figures he should know every line that makes a Richie Tozier, every color, every movement, every glance. He knows that man as personally and as intimately as you can know another person, he thinks, short of, maybe your own child.

Why did we never have kids Richie? Why have we never gotten

married? He wonders it, sometimes, when the light is soft and Richie moves to him as gently as this Not-Quite-Richie does, all warm light eyes and crooked grins.

He watches as Richie talks about his appendectomy. He remembers it better than Richie does, probably. Richie had been as low key about it as possible to his credit. He remembers his fever spiking. He remembers not sleeping the last 48 hours because Richie was stubborn and insisted that he was fine. He remembers Richie in the fetal position in their bed, sweating and shivering and talking to himself about sewers and clowns and Bill and Mike and Stan. He remembers Richie trying to get out of bed, wailing in agony and falling immediately to the floor. And he remembers being 25 and terrified that his boyfriend was going to die.

He remembers sitting like Richie must be doing now.

He remembers being hopelessly and helplessly in love.

What he doesn't remember is ever not being able to kiss Richie back. Richie is kissing him as desperately and as passionately as he did that rainy summer day in the middle of the street when they were sixteen and about to make one of the earliest decisions that set them on the trajectory that led them to where they are today. But now, it has the practice of a lifetime, softness of familiarity, and the desperate fire of need.

Like he'd ever let that kiss lie. Yeah... *over his dead body.*

Richie is kissing him so hard Eddie's pretty sure his ears are ringing. When he pulls back, he makes a joke. When he tries to respond, the *beep beep*, *Richie* that's supposed to come is only a continuous, shrill scream of a heart monitor going berserk.

In the days that followed the arrhythmic episode that threatened to give Richie one of his own, he'd been particularly on edge every time a doctor came in to talk to him. The pre-dawn sky painted muted colors through the window but still left them in particular darkness. Richie leaned up into bed and kissed Eddie on the cheek gently. "Hey, babe. It's day 20," he said, voice low and gravelly. He was

tired. This whole thing was exhausting. He just wanted Eddie to wake up.

He kissed the back of his hand, staring at the jumble of wires and tubes that were vital to keeping Eddie alive. Each performed a different, specific function. “They said they have ‘ *decisions* ’ for me to make today.” The word decisions stuck in his mouth, as bitter and uncomfortable as a piece of pepper caught in his teeth for the better part of a day.

The feeling in his gut that had been chasing him since the tunnels had finally caught up to him. He hadn’t voiced it because, in Richie’s experience, that was never good. He couldn’t tell the Losers what he thought they were going to ask him to do because then they would have to talk about it. And they would all have different reactions and it wouldn’t be helpful. It wouldn’t be helpful at all, especially when the decisions all came down to Richie. “I think they want me to decide whether or not I’m ready to let you go,” he said, as quietly as he could, almost as though he expected some too-helpful nurse to come in and commend him for being so perceptive and *yes, that’s exactly what we want to know* .

Richie sat by Eddie’s side, watching as the deepest hues of the sky became crisp, bright hues. The nurses came in to monitor Eddie’s vital signs and administer his medications. One of them, Miss Kim, who was literally every nurse Richie had ever seen written for television, spunky and short with the vaguest southern accent, warm and maternal, and wore bright patterned scrubs brought him in a coffee before she went home for the day. He thanked her. He sat with the paper cup between his hands, enjoying the warmth.

“Are you hurting? Are you healing?” he mused, wishing, not for the first time that Eddie would answer him. “Are you still in there at all?” He knew he was. He knew. There couldn’t be any other way. In his heart, Richie knew he would feel it if Eddie wasn’t there. He would feel it if there was no hope. He would know.

Richie didn’t believe in all that twin flames, halves of a whole bullshit. He didn’t really believe in soulmates except in a passing, *this idiot right here? this one’s mine*, type of way. But still, he’d known Eddie his whole life. There was so much of him that was formed by

his knowing Eddie and so much of Eddie that was there by virtue of Richie. It was hard to tell where one ended and one began anymore. The fibers that made them themselves independently were so much the same ones that made them *them* . “Babe, please,” he whispered, putting down his coffee and climbing up into the bed with him, careful not to disturb a single wire. “*Please* ,” he begged, “Give me something to go on here. I don’t...” He trailed off, trying to keep himself calm as he worked through what his mind feared most.

“If you’re in pain, if this is worse...” he asked, running his fingers through Eddie’s hair and down the side of his cheek, tracing every piece he knew so well. “If keeping you here is worse for you than whatever might come after, I need to know.”

Richie curled his leg up over Eddie’s and gently laid his head beside his. The hospital bed was too small, obviously, for him to truly feel comfortable with two grown men lying side by side, but it was the most right he’d felt the whole time. Ironic, because even thinking about what he was musing felt so unequivocally *wrong* . Tears swimming his vision, Richie had to stop and calm himself to reach his final query.

When he’d finally managed to get his heart rate back where it belonged, Richie snaked his arms around Eddie, avoiding the bandages over his chest and back, and looked up at him. From this angle, it would almost have been too easy to pretend that he’d just woken up before him and he was sleeping soundly. It was a gentle, comfortable escape that Richie desperately wanted. Instead, he chose to stay in the moment. “Is this the end?” he asked, voice wrecked with tears. “Do you want me to let you go?”

And there it was. He’d finally gotten himself to ask the question he feared more than anything else.

“Eddie, please, I need a sign.”

Reaching his breaking point, watching Richie sob and paw at him, Eddie began to panic. He needed to let him know he was still there; not to give up on him. Richie won’t give up on him. He won’t. He knows it.

Still, he stops, musters up all his strength and starts to scream. At first, his voice is weak. Clearly, three weeks unused will do that. He tried again. He took a step back and balled his fists, trying again. Better, but it was more like a whimper, like the first day after laryngitis.

The third time.

The third time, Eddie wailed out at full volume, “Richie, I love you!” The power of his voice startled him. He’d almost forgotten what it was like. “Don’t give up on me!”

Richie nearly fell out of the bed as the “No” half of the No Smoking sign fell off of the wall and clattered to the floor beside him. He stared down at the single word and stared at it, a slight smile working at his eyes.

That was *that* then.

Notes for the Chapter:

I hope that hebrew prayer was ... close. Please don't be offended.

10. When The Sun Came Up You Were Looking At Me

Summary for the Chapter:

Now that Eddie's in the hospital, everything is a waiting game. How long will the Losers have to wait until he opens his eyes- if he ever does?

It was a long, *long* morning before the head of the unit they'd been keeping Eddie in came and posed her dilemma to Richie. He stiffened in the conference room chair as she showed him data and projections and articles on patients with similar timelines as Eddie's. It was all very clinical; straightforward and emotionless, from her anyway. Richie, however, felt like the slightest breeze could knock him out of his chair.

"I suppose," she said, folding her hands in her lap neatly and looking directly at Richie, "what I mean to ask is this." She closed the file folder on the table and leaned forward to him. "Is this course of treatment something you want to sustain? Every day we have to keep him under, the likelihood of his return to function decreases..."

Richie hung his head, effectively tuning her out. A lifetime of memories played through his head at a deafening volume. Days spent at the quarry, nights spent wrapped in each other's arms with sweat-slick skin sticking together. The Christmas Eddie had managed to talk Richie into renting a cabin in the mountains and they got snowed in until after New Years. The summer Eddie had gone on tour with him. The business dinners with Eddie's clients and his writers. Eddie noticing someone from the office ahead of them in line for coffee and bolting so as not to be roped into working on his day off as Richie laughed along beside him. Classes they skipped. Adventures they'd had. Sleepy Sundays spent side-by-side on the sofa.

This woman was asking him if he was ready to give that up.

Not only that, she was suggesting that he give up the potential for more. Give up the dream that maybe, one day, he'd see Eddie at an altar with all of their friends around them. That he'd watch Eddie

holding their baby in the middle of the night. Suggesting that he deny another 30 years or more with his best friend by his side.

How do you ask that? What did she expect him to say? “Yeah, sure, that’s *fiine*, let the love of my life die when we did everything we could to get him here so you could help him.” Not likely. Not even close.

Eddie was only forty. He had so much more life to live and Richie wasn’t about to let that go.

The doctor had fallen silent. She tried to be respectful; to give him a moment to process. “Mr. Tozier?” she asked quietly.

In a sudden moment of clarity, everything fell into place. Richie told the woman, in no uncertain terms, what he wanted- what he expected- and if they weren’t going to be able to do it here, then they should be prepared to have Eddie transferred immediately because there had to be someone, somewhere, who would be able to give Eddie the care he needed. Even if that meant going back to L.A.

Nodding along silently, the woman began to piece it all together in her mind. That was, indeed, the problem. Derry gen was a small hospital with no accreditation to its name. It didn’t have the staff or the means for a case like Eddie’s, at least not for a long period of time.

There was some debate about the best course of action, but ultimately, forty-five soul-crushing minutes later, Richie left the room. He dug his hand into his pocket and pulled out his phone, blindly tapping on the last call.

Stan had hardly been able to pick up before Richie started talking. “Okay. So, they, uh...” he trailed off trying to put the pieces together. “They don’t have the means to keep him under here, and they insist he’s not ready to come up, so they’re going to transfer him to Bangor.”

An audible sigh of relief flooded through the receiver. “Okay,” Stan said, relieved that it wasn’t what he knew Richie had been fearing with every doctor’s tutting and every nurse’s pitying glance. They

weren't giving up on Eddie. There was still time.

It was late by the time the hospital's transportation company had come for Eddie. The policy was that no one could ride along, so the Losers crammed into their rentals. With Richie's long since returned, he rode along with Stan. bidding Derry adieu, they started their trek in nervous silence.

By the time they arrived, the hospital had shut down its visitor's entrance. The six of them wandered the halls, searching for where Eddie might be. A kindly older gentleman directed them to the intake desk. This time around, everything was much calmer. Bill had palmed his wedding ring off to Richie in an effort to make the husband story a little more believable. They weren't bloodsoaked and ragged, now, so it would be a little harder to explain that away.

Still, after the paperwork was done and policies were gone over, the nurses explained that, since it was so late, they would have to leave until morning, or at the very least stay in the waiting room so as not to disturb any sleeping patients. Needless to say, Richie was not happy with that. He managed, however, to keep his cool this time. No lashing out.

That is, of course, until the Losers tried to convince him to leave. He couldn't be with Eddie, the nurses had made that abundantly clear. It was too late to do anything about it. In the morning, after a good night's rest and a belly full of fatty diner foods, they'd be able to get in touch with people who could make things happen. For the moment, it was best to let them work.

The strong arm slung firmly around Richie's shoulders, guiding him back down the hallway to the emergency room entrance they'd been directed to was shrugged off quickly. "No. Bill, no," Richie said, forcibly turning his friend to look at him. The other Losers stopped as well. "I'm not leaving him. It's not happening," he insisted.

Stepping in and pushing a stray curl from in front of his eyes, Bev shook her head. "They have to admit him, honey. You can't be in the room for that."

"But I can be here," Richie argued.

Ben, however, looked almost as exhausted as Richie felt. "It's almost midnight, Rich," he said, taking his friend by the hands and directing him to face him straight on. "Come on, let's just go back to the hotel and get settled in," he insisted. His calm, level head and understanding eyes had won Richie over the first time. He vaguely recalled feeling better after going back to the hotel and showering, but that was a lifetime ago. That was entirely different circumstances. Still, Ben was insistent. "We'll start fresh in the morning."

Remembering a more important argument in the life of Richie Tozier, Stan came in clutch, as usual. "There is also a Denny's on the corner," he said, wrapping his arm around Richie tightly and redirecting him to the door. "You can eat real food and they'll call us if anything changes."

"Is Denny's real food?" Mike asked teasingly, earning him a stern look from Stan.

Bev shrugged. "It's better than hospital food," she offered, taking up Richie's other side and smiling encouragingly.

A step behind, Ben turned back to face the two who were now lagging behind. "It's an American institution," he said, giving them the *come on, catch up!* hand wave.

"And I can stay, if you want," Bill said, realizing that they might have more questions. It made sense to leave someone behind, but Richie would go stir crazy. He'd try to break into Eddie's room and get himself kicked out. Bill was the better, saner bet. "I'll stay here in the waiting room, just in case."

Richie turned back. If anyone was staying, it should be him. He should be here. Just in case. If Bill was staying...

"Go eat," Bill insisted.

Realizing that Mike, too, had fallen out of step, Richie's questioning gaze fell back on him. "Buddy system," he said hesitantly, trying ineffectually to hide the not-so-subtle way Bill had his finger hooked into his belt loop, wordlessly asking him to stay behind, too. Stan

shot him a warning glance, but it didn't really matter.

A couple of nights before, Richie had overheard a discussion between hushed voices in an abandoned waiting room.

"You four need to do better at keeping your hands to yourself." That was Stan. Stan had mothered Richie for enough of his childhood that there were no two ways around it.

The next voices overlapped. One was Bill, the other Ben. Richie just wasn't sure which. "Why?"

The second chimed in. "Oh, come on, Stanley." Ben. That one was definitely Ben.

Richie stared at the floor. He appreciated the effort but, truthfully, it didn't make much of a difference. Making everyone else miserable because he was wasn't fair. Sure, the instinct made sense. He saw where Stan was coming from. It just wasn't necessary.

He reached for the door, but Stan's voice stilled him. "Have you not seen the way he looks at you?" He wondered who that was directed at. Probably Bill and Mike, he presumed, though the silence from Bev could have been telling, too. "You guys are breaking his heart."

No, Richie thought. *I'm not a monster. I want my friends to be happy.*

"I don't think we have anything to do with it," Ben answered, voice a little timid. Through the frosted glass, Richie could just about make out his bowed head. *Don't make Ben feel bad for finally getting the girl, Stan*, he thought. *It's not his fault.*

Richie could almost hear the huffy eye-roll that accompanied Stan's, "Well, you're certainly not making it any easier on him."

"Stan, Richie's a big boy," Mike chimed in. His silhouette merged with the smaller one in front of him, clearly having wrapped Bill in his arms. "We're not rubbing it in his face. We're all here for each other."

He was right. The clearest thing that came back to Richie as he started to piece together the missing fragments of his childhood was

how close they all were. Part of what made the clubhouse work was that they were more than comfortable to be in a veritable dogpile.

Probably thanks to all of that shared trauma, they couldn't seem to settle in unless they were touching someone else.

It wasn't right to make it seem like anything else.

"I touch Richie as often as I touch Bev," Ben laughed, cementing Richie's standpoint.

Bev moved to Stan and Richie could see her reach for his arm.

"Yeah, I mean, it's not like we're making out in front of his locker or something." Her tone was gentle, albeit a little embarrassed. She clearly seemed to agree with Stan, despite herself.

"That's what I'm talking about, though," Stan argued, taking a step back from them. "Your first instinct was to make a reference to being teenagers. We're not anymore. We're forty," he said, voice near a shout. "You two are still married to other people! This isn't..."

Bill's silhouette separated from Mike's, moving to Bev's side. "What, Stanley?" he asked. Richie couldn't tell for sure, but it seemed like he'd stunned Bev to tears. From their position, Richie couldn't see that they were holding hands, but still, he knew they were, further proving Mike and Ben's points.

There was a lengthy awkward silence. "Just try to be more respectful. Okay?" Stan asked, resigned to the realization that they'd do whatever they wanted anyway.

Noticing the Losers dispersing, Richie took a step back out of sight.

They all turned the opposite way, toward the elevators, except for Stan, who nearly crashed into Richie. "I'm not made of glass, ConStanTinople," he said, linking his arm through his friend's. "Do you honestly think they're hurting me by being in love?"

Eyeing him carefully, Stan considered it. The front he had up now versus the one he slipped into when he was alone with Bev in Ben's lap wasn't an even match, he knew, but still. "Yes, if your face is anything to go by."

Richie sighed. "Look, I'm happy for them," he insisted. "It's soft and new and they all deserve that." Stan rolled his eyes and his thumb traced his wedding ring absently. Richie wondered absently if it wasn't more the infidelity that Stan was lashing out against than standing up for Richie. "I won't lie and say that watching Ben steal a kiss doesn't make me long for when Eddie used to do the same at the beginning, but it's not because of them." Stan considered him for a moment as Richie shook his head. "It would never be that."

In the days since that exchange, things had leveled out. Now that the men stood openly before him, Richie knew he was right to try to talk Stan down from his tirade. "Okay. The minute anything changes," he said, locking eyes with Bill.

"The second," he corrected.

Richie gave a wordless nod of thanks and the four left in search of sustenance.

The diner was less than a block away. It was, technically, attached to the hospital which made Richie feel better about the whole thing. Ben and Stan went inside while Bev and Richie shared a smoke as they waited for their table. Apparently, it was one of the only restaurants open locally, so it saw good business, even into the midnight hour.

After a while, they went inside out of the late fall air, which neither of them were truly dressed for. "You first, Richie," Ben said, standing aside so that he could slide in when they joined him. "Can't have you trying to split on us."

"*Funny*. Funny, funny guy," Richie groaned, resting his head against the wall. Watching Bev across the table, busying herself on knotting and unknotting the tie at the middle of her olive green field jacket. Her focus was steeled at the end of the drawstring. "Do I look that bad that you won't even look me in the eye?" Richie asked, tilting his head to try to line his sights with hers.

Bev seemed startled, glancing up at him, then immediately back at her hands. "No. I just..." She swallowed thickly and shook her head. She still felt horrible about the cavern. She still, as far as she

knew, hadn't explained herself. She didn't know that he'd been awake for her conversation with Eddie a few nights prior. "I'm sorry, Richie," she said, eyes brimming with tears as she finally looked up at him.

"I know."

Bev's eyes widened slightly. "No, I haven't..." she stammered.

Reaching his hand across to hers, Richie shook his head. "It's done, Bev. It's over," he said. "I'm too tired." Instinctively, Ben moved in toward Richie and wrapped his arm around him. "He's still *fighting*." Her eyes flicked to him, realizing he was using her words back to her. When it sunk in, he leaned back into Ben and continued to hold her hand. "This is me accepting your apology, whatever it was going to be."

"I just... I saw..." She looked up, trying to word the last dream she'd had before they went into Neibolt.

Richie squeezed her hand a little more tightly. "I saw it, too," he said, wondering how many times he'd promise himself to talk to Bev about what he saw before he actually did. "But I changed it. I moved him," he said. Bev nodded. "And if you saw the same things I saw, then you were still trying to change mine, too." He was next. He knew it. If he had stayed with Eddie, they'd have both died for sure. "And yours," he shuddered, brain reproducing the sickening noise of the rocks hitting Bev's frame. "And everyone else's." He sniffed a little.

Bev looked at him, meaning to argue, but letting it be. If Richie believed it, who was she to cast that aside.

Knowing that she was struggling to believe him, he shook her hand emphatically. "We changed it."

She took a deep breath and finally gave in. "We did," she said, choking back tears as she clamped her fingers down around his. "We won, Richie."

"Fuck yeah, we did," Ben said, jarring Richie from side to side. Stan

lifted his freshly delivered coffee cup in a toast, encouraging the other three to lift theirs as well.

Just as they'd done 27 years earlier with oversized milkshakes. "To the Losers," Stan had said, then, lifting his chocolate malted in the air. "Long may they reign!"

"Long may they reign!" they repeated back, six glasses clinking together in unison.

Eddie had just taken a spoonful of his own sickeningly pink milkshake when Richie gave him a celebratory clap on the shoulder, causing him to cough exaggeratedly. "Jesus, are you trying to kill me, assface?"

"Yes, because a slap on the back would be your cause of death," Richie deadpanned.

"If I choke to death on a spoon? Yeah." Richie rolled his eyes, then fixed his stare on Eddie, who found himself wilting under Richie's gaze. "Or- OR! If I perforate my esophagus? Do you know how many infections I'd be susceptible to? Do you want me to get diverticulitis or have a strep infection travel into my bloodstream? Is that what you want?" he rambled nervously.

Throwing his hands in the air, Richie groaned, nearly upending his milkshake in a puddle of pale green. "Alright, you caught me. Your mother will only marry me if I get you out of the way first," he said, leaning in close enough to Eddie that he could smell the mint and chocolate on his breath. "She wants all of her progeny to have my sparkling personality," he beamed, snapping back when he realized just how their exchange might look to an outsider.

He needn't have bothered, though, because as Eddie realized the same thing, he gave Richie a shove, nearly sending him out of his chair. "There are easier ways to kill me than that, asshole." He groaned, leaning back into Bev's shoulder. "You would end up causing me one that's slow and painful. Why not just stab me and get it over with?" In an effort to free her arm so that she could go back to enjoying her peanut butter and banana shake, she did so, jabbing Eddie's cast with the tines of her fork. He gave her an

apologetic look but hardly moved.

“With my giant, manly dong?” Richie suggested, wagging his eyebrows.

“Beep beep, Richie...” Bev and Stan groaned in unison, while Bill and Mike exchanged an undetected look, scooting their chairs slightly away from each other. Bill added to their performative avoidance by taking a long, gurgling sip from his glass of fudge swirl while Mike stared pointedly into his root beer float.

Eddie straightened his hand under his jaw, pointing it directly at Richie. “You know what, it’s not my fault I have a sensitive gag reflex,” he rambled as they continued their spat in the background, largely ignored by the Losers.

Bill turned to Bev, pointing across her at the pair. “W-w-why do we bring them a-l-l-long?”

“I don’t buy that for a second,” said Richie.

“To keep an eye on them,” Stan answered with a long-beleaguered sigh. “They’d probably kill each other if we left them alone too long.”

Eddie gave Richie an unnoticed kick under the table, leaving his foot too close to Richie’s for someone who claimed to be fighting him off. “Yeah, well, you’ll never find out will, you?”

In unison, Richie and Bev both responded to Eddie with a stunned “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Meanwhile, Ben answered with a quiet “Promise?” as he poked his straw into the whipped cream on top of his own peanut butter and banana shake.

A wave of sudden bravery washed over Eddie and he looked Richie dead in the eye. “Think about it.” When Richie seemed good and rattled, he smiled, returning his gaze to the rest of the Losers.

“Oh, come on, Stan,” Richie said, merging into the larger conversation with only the subtlest of mental blips. He slung his arm

lazily around Stan's shoulders and rocked back and forth. "You know as well as I do that your life wouldn't be nearly as exciting without us."

Missing the teasing and landing straight on sentimentality. "I know mine wouldn't," he said. Even barring their recent victory against a certain supernatural entity, he knew from the moment Bev launched that first rock that this ragtag group of miscreants was his ragtag group of miscreants.

Eddie leaned forward onto his elbows to look over at Mike, smiling at his benign act of defiance- how's this for table manners, ma? "Did you talk your grandpop out of homeschooling for this year?" He hardly even protested when Richie swiped his spoon to sample his shake.

"I think I have him just about worn down," Mike nodded. "Cut off's next week, right?"

Bill and Stan kicked the dates back and forth between them for a moment as Richie found himself entangled in a game of keep-away with Eddie, who was nearing the end of his rope. "I'm gonna cut your fucking dick off if you don't give me back my spoon, you fuckturd."

"Feisty," he snarked, popping the bowl of the spoon into his mouth and licking it teasingly. "Keeping it all to yourself or planning to share with Mrs. K?"

Eyes wide in exasperation, Bill turned away from Richie and focused on Mike. "Yeah. H-h-h-hurry up, Mikey. We don't some other group of l-l-losers stealing you from us because you decided you didn't want to spend eight hours a day with Tom and Jerry."

"I'm trying, man," he laughed.

Bev gave a bittersweet smile at Ben across the table. "You ready to not be the new kid, new kid?" she asked.

Shrugging absently, Ben continued to poke at the melting dessert in front of him. "I'll still be the new kid," he said, "Nobody moves

here.”

“Mike’ll be the new kid, though,” she said, flitting her eyes between the two as it set in.

“Oh. I hadn’t thought about that!” he beamed.

Meanwhile, Mike groaned sarcastically, noting the teasing smiles on each of the remaining Losers’ faces. “And thanks for that…”

“And you’ll be the new kid somewhere completely different,” Richie said, leaning behind Eddie and ruffled her hair, adding in the familiar strain of “Whatcha gonna do?”

“You have problems,” she laughed.

Finally, landing in a more serious tone, he added sadly, “Yeah. Yeah, I do.” He let his arm slide down and tugged her chair closer to Eddie’s wrapping them both in his grasp. The rest of their table missed the easy stab at Richie, instead hanging their heads as it sunk in once more that Bev was leaving. She was going to be the first one to go and no one knew how to handle it. They couldn’t stop it. They couldn’t defeat it. No matter how many times Richie joked about her living under his bed or Ben planned to make the clubhouse more livable and, essentially, a studio apartment, they couldn’t change it.

Bev reached around, giving Richie a squeeze right back. “Hey. I’m only going to Portland,” she said. “I’ll write and I’ll call,” she assured, pulling Bill in on her other side. He clapped an arm around her, gripping Eddie’s shoulder tightly as she finished, “I have no intention of losing my Losers.”

By the time Stan had mimicked Bill’s movement beside Richie, Eddie was wondering how he’d wound up in the middle, feeling rather smushed. Before long, Eddie’s still injured arm was protesting to the pressure when- *pop!* His shoulder cracked. There was no dislocation, but still, he gave a sharp cry before shouting, “Could you fucking not?!”

Immediately, the Losers backed off. Tail tucked between his legs, Richie spiraled into an apology. “Sorry, sorry, sorry. Shit,” he

hissed, watching him rub the tender spot on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Eds. Are you okay."

"Yeah," he groaned, sniping out a final insult under his breath. "Cockwaffle."

Bill balked. "Cock w-w-waffle?"

Gradually the smile returned to Richie's face. "Talk about your breakfast of champions," he said, puffing out his chest and nudging Eddie with his elbow.

A chorus of "Beep beep, Richie," surrounded him. Yeah, they were gonna be just fine. Whatever happened, they'd work it out.

In the days that followed Eddie's transfer, the Losers started feeling a little more at ease. The new doctors seemed confident and competent. It was almost like the air had cleared. They had a game plan.

Richie wouldn't have batted an eye if someone had told him that it was all to do with staying in Derry as long as they had. He, Stan, Ben, and Bill sat in the hospital's garden. Richie turned his face to the sky, enjoying the waning sun. "It's beautiful here," he said, looking up at the snow-draped trees twinkling around the edges. *When had it gotten so cold?*

Unmoved, Bill answered with a placid, "It is."

After a short while, the cold air began to spark a fire in his lungs and Richie opened his eyes, setting his gaze on the man across the path before him. "Are you okay?"

Not bothering, or maybe unable, to look up from his phone, Bill's eyebrows were knitted into a single line, his lips downturned into a solemn frown. "What?" he asked, sounding thoroughly confused.

"Are you okay?" Richie repeated, each syllable a defined staccato.

Bill looked up, gently annoyed. He mimicked Richie's tone perfectly. "I heard you. I just..." He looked down at his phone "Yeah. I'm fine."

Nodding, but not buying it for the slightest fragment of a second, Richie answered, "You don't look fine."

He was right. Still, Bill wasn't willing to accept that. He was sure that ignoring Audra's texts in the same breath as having a quick, playful banter with Mike was adding to his greying hair. He also didn't doubt that, on some level, he was going to fuck this up. Somehow, somehow, Bill remembered that he had always been hopeless. Things were always, in his mind, his fault. He sighed deeply, hardly looking up at his friend. "Aren't we supposed to be keeping an eye on you?" he asked, trying to deflect the attention.

Richie's stare softened. "You are," he said, hoping he sounded as grateful for that as he was. From the point where he was by then, Richie could see that he would not have made it. Bev may have said that Eddie needed to fight for Richie, but an awful little voice in the back of his head kept wondering what would have happened if Eddie had fought but Richie hadn't. What if he'd woken up and Richie had let himself drown in his misery. He would forever be grateful for his Losers. "How else would I have noticed that, no offense," he said, reaching across to the facing bench and patting Bill's thigh gently. "You look like shit. Wife troubles?"

"Yeah," he nodded, oversimplifying it entirely.

Arms and legs folded neatly, an unreadable expression on his face, Stan let the moment hang silent for a while. Eventually, he asked, "Did you leave her yet?"

Stunned to near silence, Richie lifted his brows, letting out a sharp "What?"

"Stan!" Ben yelled, shocked by the line of questioning. He could only help that, if he'd asked Bev something similar, he was gentler. The situation was similar, but in her defense, and not just because he was in love with her, the bastard deserved it. He didn't know Audra, but he couldn't help but think, maybe, she didn't. Still, it wasn't exactly Stan's place to pass judgment.

Innocently, Stan put his hands up. "I'm just asking," he shrugged.

That wasn't fair, as far as Bill was concerned. "No. I l-l-l-love her," he insisted. The lump in his throat seemed to betray that effectively enough.

Richie eyed him curiously. "You just stuttered for the first time since we killed It," he observed. It was true. When the fear had subsided, so too had his stammer.

Bill groaned. "Remind me never to play poker with you guys," he said, sliding as far away from Stan as the bench would accommodate.

"Ohhh, no," Richie argued, laying his palm flat on Ben's chest, teasing it across his broad shoulders in his heavy fisherman's sweater. "Strip poker, the next time we're all in the same place and healthy," he said, patting him exaggeratedly.

Ben blushed but played along. "As long as there's no money involved, whatever," he said, rolling his eyes a bit too much to really mean it.

Attention still focused on Bill, Stan tried again. "You didn't answer my question," he asked, staring him down.

"I did," he insisted. "I said no."

"Okay. Why?" Stan said. Bill had never had a problem with honesty, so the sudden struggle was unimpressive, to say the least.

Reaching his breaking point, Bill snapped. "It's not that simple," he

Flattening his lips out, Richie shook his head. "Nothing ever is." That was the truth in spades.

If things were that simple, Eddie would be sitting with them and they wouldn't be in a hospital's courtyard having this conversation. They would be in one of their houses. They would never have lost touch. He and Mike would never have split up. Ben and Bev would have gotten together ages before. There would be a gaggle of kids running around them. It would be perfect.

But, 'tis a gift to be simple and that was never bestowed upon the Losers. Simple people didn't do what they had done.

"You don't love her," Ben said. Leave it to good ol' Haystack to boil a point down to its heart.

Adam's apple bobbing as he struggled to start his thought calmly, Bill meant to argue, "I d-d-do," but of course, his stammer wouldn't allow for that. "*Fuck*," he cursed, angry at himself for even trying.

Richie let out a sharp laugh, clapping. "What else does he do, Stan?"

"We should go get treats or something," Ben teased, reaching across and scratching him behind the ear. Bill swatted his hand away.

"Fuck you, dude," Bill said with a bashful smile. Anything that made Richie laugh or smile, now that it was so scarce, he couldn't be too mad about, even if it was at his expense. He could handle it. Still, he didn't appreciate the inference.

"No, thanks. I'm in a loving relationship," Ben replied coolly.

Without missing a beat, "So am I," countered Bill, folding his arms across his chest.

Richie whistled low, eyes wide as Stan grew more and more smug. "Just not with your wife," said the instigator. He watched his friend carefully.

Standing up, he meant to extricate himself from being incriminated further. "I'm n-n-not playing this game," Bill answered. He cursed to himself and stared at the ground. Whatever he and Mike had talked about was supposed to be between them, for the time being, at least. It wasn't fair that, even still, so many years removed, Stan could read him like a card.

"I think you are," he said, needling him in the side.

Richie crossed his legs and leaned forward. He was unbelievably excited to hear it. "Did you and Mike finally talk?" he asked, eyes wide. He had, on some level, hoped when they were kids. As they reached their teenage years, he always hoped Bill might come back. He missed him, sure, but he knew Mike was lonely without him. They'd had such a strong bond and he just couldn't help but think that maybe...

Bill toyed with the idea of lying, but with his newly discovered tic, he decided against it. "Yeah," he said, blushing a little.

A smile crossed Ben's face, then dropped into pure, unadulterated shock. "Wait, what?" he asked, nearly falling into Richie. For someone so well in tune with matters of love, he could be quite dense.

"How'd that one sneak past you?" Stan laughed, kicking lightly at Ben's leg.

Still baffled, he shook his head. "I don't know. Weren't you—"

As Ben spluttered, gesturing weakly behind him, Bill laughed lightly, cutting him off. "Hung up on Bev? No, Ben. That hasn't been a thing since you Prince Charming-ed her." He knew, on some level, that he wasn't in it for her, then.

Nodding, feeling the pieces fall into place, he finally spoke up. "Okay, so... Mike."

"Yeah," was all usually loquacious Bill could come up with. There were a million things he could say; a million ways he had fallen back in love with Mike. Still, Stan's lecture a few nights earlier had stuck with him. He thought, maybe, gushing about all of his newly rediscovered feelings would alienate Richie and he couldn't bring himself to do it. Not knowingly. Besides, he wanted Eddie to know. And he wanted Mike to be there for it.

There was a fleeting moment of warmth between the four, despite the sub-freezing temperatures. "Maybe now you people will calm the fuck down," Bill chastised benignly.

Steadily, the weather worsened over the weekend. It became harder and harder to leave the hospital and drive back and forth between the hotel, but they still managed to do so late at night, all who weren't staying the night would leave to get a good night's sleep. Usually, whoever was staying with Richie would get swept out of the hospital around midnight. Sometimes, they'd be able to charm the nurse into letting them stay. Usually, it was Ben who managed to talk people into letting him stay. It was no surprise that that night,

Bev didn't seem to suit the bill.

The constant drone of the breathing machine, the click of the I.V. and the steady beeping of the heart monitor had all but blurred away in Richie's head. The new hospital, for all its merits, only allowed two at a time and, since Richie refused to leave his side, the rest of the Losers took turns.

Richie added the 28th Sharpie tally mark to Eddie's wrist, contemplating giving him a full sleeve of tattoos. Instead, he held Eddie's right hand between his gently. Bev sat to his right, tracing small circles over his shoulders. "Squeeze my hand if you can hear me," Richie coaxed, pressing a kiss to the other man's thumb. "Come on, Eddie. Give me something." He lifted his hand, careful not to disturb any of the wires and tubes. "Eddie, I've never gone this long without hearing your grating, snippy voice." Bev watched him sadly.

A month had elapsed since their boss battle with It. In that time, Richie had gone to extremes trying to get Eddie to wake up, even though he understood that it was medically necessary for him to heal; even though he knew they were keeping him under. "I'm going to lick your face and I haven't brushed my teeth in..." he paused, realizing he couldn't give an actual number, settling on "a long time. Please." He closed his eyes and rested his head on their entwined hands. "Please, Eddie," he whispered, a prayer to the only entity he'd ever worshiped.

Leaning into him, Bev's voice quivered. She hadn't been surprised in the least when he finally broke down and told each of the Losers the truth about his relationship with Eddie. The minute they met up in the parking lot of Jade Of The Orient, she could tell. If they were hiding it, they obviously had their reasons. "Richie, honey, come on," she cooed, trying to walk back the breakdown she could hear coming. "The doctors said..."

"Look, Bev, I love you," he said, a little shorter than he'd intended, turning to face her sharply, but with no malice, just exhaustion. He slid his glasses up onto his head and closed his eyes. "but please don't go there. I know what they said." They said *if* he wakes up. They said *if* the swelling goes down. They said *if* it had been an inch higher. They said *if* they'd taken any longer to get him out... They said *if* so many fucking times that Richie thought he would rather fight the

next person who said the fucking word to him than listen to another hypothetical situation.

"You can't do this to yourself," Beverly said, combing her fingers through the mess of curls his hair had become. "We got him out. He's safe."

Richie choked out an incredulous laugh. "Safe." That took some nerve. Safe would be their bed, 3200 miles from Derry. Safe requires the person in question to be awake. He couldn't believe her. "You of all people should understand." Watching his friend blink at him, he sighed. "In the deadlights... I saw him die." A sob escaped with his admission, forcing him into another fit of tears. "I saw him die and we left him there. You guys dragged me away and I couldn't fucking do anything." He vaguely registered Bev's arms encircling him, but that was little comfort to Richie. "I came to and he was on top of me and I did everything I could. He still wound up kebabbed. He still..."

"I know," she said, resting her cheek against his head.

"Do you?" he snapped. Bev moved back instinctively and he regretted it immediately. "What if it was..." Watching her shift uncomfortably at the suggestion, he merely grumbled, "forget it." He was so fucking tired. He nodded his glasses back down onto his nose and returned his gaze to Eddie.

She swallowed thickly, thinking the whole situation through. "If it was Ben?" *If it was Ben...* she thought over what would have happened if Pennywise had slit his throat while she and Mike held him. If he'd drowned in the dirt, grasping for her hand. She couldn't have handled it. She couldn't even imagine if they'd been together since they were kids. "It's different. It's new," she admitted, finally agreeing that his reaction wasn't so far fetched, "but I'd be inconsolable."

"Exactly. So stop wasting your breath," he said, unable to bring himself to look at her. She got to go back to the Townhouse, crawl into bed with good ol' Haystack, feel his arms around her, wake him up when she has a nightmare, kiss him, talk to him...

Likewise, Bev couldn't look at Richie. She had no reason to feel

guilty, but still... Staring at the too-even rise and fall of Eddie's chest, she shook her head. He wasn't dead. He was there. "Look. Watch the monitor," she instructed, pointing to the jagged lines of his heart rate. "He's alive," she reminded him gently, sliding one of his hands up to Eddie's wrist. "Feel right here. His heartbeat is right here and you're not imagining it. He's not going anywhere." She regained the courage to look at Richie. "They're gonna start weaning him off the meds in the morning, so he should be awake by dinner tomorrow." Richie sniffled unevenly, nodding. "Why don't we go back to the townhouse and get some sleep." She suggested, returning her hand to his shoulders. "Shower. Eat real people food. He's gonna need you in good shape when he wakes up."

The surety of Bev's statement wasn't lost on Richie. Blinking out the last of his tears, he shook his head, knowing that she was prepared for him to decline, like he had every night prior. "I haven't slept anywhere but beside him since we were seventeen. I doubt I could even if I wanted to."

"Richie..."

"I'm not leaving," he repeated.

Bev sighed, standing up and straightening her back. "Okay, honey. Okay. Call me before you go to sleep." She leaned across him and kissed Eddie's cheek gently. "Love you, Eds." On her way by, she stopped and wrapped Richie in a tight hug, kissing the top of his head. "Love you, Trashmouth."

He gave a humorless laugh and reached up to pat her hair. "Love you too."

That night was the slowest one since the first couple when everything had been touch and go. He called Bev around 12:30 and swore he was going to sleep. He didn't. Instead, he watched cheesy, nostalgic movies on his phone, all Eddie's favorites; *Dirty Dancing*, then *Pretty in Pink*. He marked the 29th tally as Duckie sent Andi off after Blaine, the only part of the movie Richie couldn't get behind. Still, Eddie had told him he loved him for the first time to the strains of the song from the end of this movie so he could never shut it off. And it had been 29 days without talking to the love of his life. 29 soul-

sucking days. Eventually, he dozed off about two-thirds of the way through *The Outsiders*.

All-too-soon, he was awakened by the bustle of a shift change and nurses doing their thing and the whole process started over. Around 8 a.m., the morning nurse came in. Richie had hardly noticed, in a sort of daze.

“Mr. Tozier?” she asked, quietly.

Snapping back to reality, he nearly dropped Eddie’s hand. “Oh, sorry,” he said, shaking the fog from his brain. Eddie really needed to wake up now.

“You’re fine,” she insisted, bringing a bag of liquid to the stand by the bed and a handful of small bottles. “Just scoot back for me a little, please.” She hung the bag and screwed it into Eddie’s I.V. line, then affixed the bottles.

Squinting to make out the labels, as though he’d have any idea of their purpose, Richie decided instead to just ask the nurse. “What’s that for?”

She smiled and put her hand on his shoulder. “To start countering the sedative before we back it off.”

Richie took a deep breath. “Okay,” he nodded. His heart hammered in his chest. They were actually going to wake him up today.

“Can I get you anything?” the woman asked sweetly.

As though Richie was the one anyone needed to worry about. He shook his head and managed the weakest of smiles. “You’re already working on the only thing I could possibly ask you for.”

She leaned against the empty sliding table and eyed him carefully. “How about a coffee and a bagel?”

Richie paused. He hadn’t eaten since lunchtime the day prior, so it wasn’t a bad idea. “I’d appreciate it. Thank you,” he said, realizing that maybe Bev had been right.

If Richie had thought that night was long, he was in for the most torturously slow day. Nurses in and out. Medicines of all sorts. He didn't know what to do with himself, so he just... stared. Asked questions. Finally, the nurses administered the last of the rounds Eddie would need to wake up and Richie was left alone to his thoughts.

After two episodes of I Love Lucy, he leaned in as close to Eddie as he could. "Do you remember the first time we did this?" he asked, knowing there would be no response. "When you had your tonsils out and I snuck in like a fucking ninja as soon as I saw my beloved Sonia leave?" He gave a bitter laugh, imagining what good ol' Mrs. K would do seeing Eddie laid up like this with that dirty Tozier boy still by his side. "The woman couldn't manage to sleep in the chair for one night." He gave a mischievous smile for the benefit of no one. "But, experienced as I was in the art of finding ways to see my Eds, I sweet-talked the nurse into letting me stay."

He certainly hadn't done a great deal of sweet-talking anyone this time. That had been Mike, plus a good deal of good faith from Bev and Bill. But he'd certainly known how to work adults when he was a kid. "I snuck you in a pint of real ice cream and we played Gameboy in bed together and, even though I tried to get you to shut up, you couldn't let me do all the talking and even though it hurt, you still laughed and joked." He took a deep breath, realizing he was rambling. He stared up at the ceiling, blinking back tears once more. "God, and I thought I was in love with you then," he groaned. It was almost hysterical how he still felt like that same clueless teenager.

"I don't know what 14-year-old Richie would think of 39-year-old Richie but I hope he'd enjoy knowing that he's still in love with you." He sniffed, giving in to the tears because what else was he supposed to do. He rolled his eyes, adding "He'd probably call me a pussy for all the crying I've done in the last three weeks but that's fine. It's normal. It's whatever," he dismissed darkly, voice thick and nasally. "He's a teenager. What the fuck does he know? Bug-eyed little creep," he laughed, pawing the tears from under his glasses. "How to keep the person he loves in one piece. Something that apparently fades with age," he waited for a response again, mainly out of muscle memory. He stood and propped himself awkwardly on the edge of

the bed.

He took a much more serious, exhausted tone. "I need you to laugh, babe. I need you to wake up and bitch at me for my rumpled shirt and greasy hair and getting snot on you and crying and getting you stabbed in that fucking sewer." He sighed, leaning back a little to just watch him. He could have sworn he saw... he shook his head. That wasn't possible. It was wishful thinking. "Eddie, please," he started, but cut himself when he saw a pair of startled, panicked brown eyes staring up at him, gagging on the respirator. "Holy shit. Hi," he sobbed, stroking his side, momentarily at a loss for what to do. Suddenly, he refocused and remembered the nurse's instructions. Keep him calm and hit the emergency call button immediately. "Okay, stay calm, babe," he said, springing from his seat and hitting the bright red button on the remote for the TV. "We'll get them to take this out." He took Eddie's hand and stroked it, trying to ward off the look of sheer terror in Eddie's face. "Stay calm, okay," he cooed. Hearing footsteps outside the door, Richie called out frantically "Shelly!"

"What do you need, baby?" she asked, seemingly startled by the call. When she pulled back the curtain, she flew into action mode. "Oh! Mr. Kaspbrak, welcome back." Eddie choked a little against the machine and Richie felt his chest constrict. "Don't fight the tube, sweetie," she said warmly. "We'll get this out of here. Relax."

Eddie locked eyes with Richie, then nodded and finally squeezed his hand. The nurse gave them a little smile. "Cough a couple of times for me." Eddie, ever the good patient, did as he was instructed. Shelly raised a small hooked tool and pointed it out to the men. "This is gonna suck the fluids out. Okay?" Eddie nodded and coughed again. "I know, I know," she soothed. "Alright, I'm gonna ask you to take a couple of deep breaths, tell you to hold one, then when you push all that air out, I'm going to extract the breathing tube. Okay?" She was talking to Eddie, but for some reason, Richie nodded too, then admonished himself for it. "Alright. In." He did. "Hold." He did. "Out." He did. Shelly pulled the tube out and Richie had to try not to wince as he watched the outline of it move up his windpipe. "Attaboy," she said, nodding proudly and patting him on the shoulder as he caught his breath. "It's nice to see you. I'll let your husband

have a minute before we continue.”

“Hi,” Eddie said, voice raspy and quiet.

Richie fought against the urge to fling himself on top of him, instead nearly collapsing onto the bed rail and grasping his hand. “Eddie. Oh my god. You’re awake. You’re alive. I was so scared.”

“God, I love you.” “I love you so much.” “You’re here,” he babbled, unable to pry his eyes from Eddie’s- *God, had they always been that beautiful?*

“Did we...” Eddie asked, then his eyes darted to the nurse.

Richie smiled broadly, then broke into wrecked sobs. “We did. It’s over. Everyone’s okay and It’s gone. It’s not gonna bother us ever again.” He leaned his forehead against Eddie’s, tears smattering down on him and he couldn’t be bothered to care. “We never have to fight It again.”

Eddie nodded slowly, taking the minimal information in. It was over. They won. “Will you shut up so I can kiss you?” he asked, wincing.

“If I’d have known that that was all it took to get a kiss out of you, I’d have been quiet as a mouse for the last-” From behind him, he heard Shelly laugh and blushed, nodding. “Sorry. I’m shutting up.”

Richie leaned forward and let Eddie reach up into his hair, pulling him into a warm kiss that, if Eddie had noticed the taste of stale instant coffee or the slick of unwashed hair or tears still streaming down Richie’s face mingling with the ones starting to fall from his own, he’d never mention it. It was, for his money, possibly the best kiss they’d ever shared- and he had every intention of doing it again and again. When he opened his eyes again, he caught a glimpse of something odd, a splash of color. “What the fuck is this?” Eddie asked, laughing at the group of black slashes on his wrist, looking strangely like a barcode.

Richie laughed, too. He couldn’t even begin to explain the scattered mess in his head without Eddie to help balance it out. Instead, he kissed the inside of Eddie’s palm, where the 27-year-old scar no

longer lived and felt himself relax back into the chair.

They were free of It.

Author's Note:

Tags will be updated as we go, so as not to give too much away ahead of time, but also... You can get a gist of what we're looking at if you keep in mind that this is still It.

"You're gonna suffer, but you're gonna be happy about it." - Ron Weasley describing my writing.